

Tests

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CORDLESS PHONES

PORTABLE DVD

PLAYERS

ASIAN-STYLE FAST

MEALS

CHOICE

Independent information for smart consumers



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FIND THE BEST DEAL

Surviving the
supermarket
sell

Toddler safety
gates fail
tests

COMING SOON IN CHOICE

DVD/HARD DISK
RECORDERS

GSM PHONES

FRIDGES

ELECTRIC WALL
OVENS

PLUNGER COFFEE



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Hello from our new CEO

It's ironic that while consumers have more information and choice in the marketplace than ever before, it just seems to get harder to find someone who'll tell it to you straight. We

increasingly confront firms, salespeople, and even professionals whose advice is tainted by conflicts of interest, such as high commission payments or undisclosed sponsorship.

So who can you trust to act in your interests? Who'll recommend the best deal for you, rather than something whose benefits go to the adviser or seller? These questions are more important than ever before.

I've spent the last few years as head of consumer protection at the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, so I've seen the damage bad advice can do in financial services. And bad advice usually stems from situations where the adviser puts their own interests before the consumer's. This underlines the need consumers have for information and advice that isn't tainted by conflicts of interest. We'll be fighting even more vigorously to ensure you can get this advice in consumer markets.

That's one of the reasons I'm excited about leading the Australian Consumers' Association. Our independence is critical. In a marketplace filled with a lot of 'noise' masquerading as consumer information, you know you can trust CHOICE to take independence seriously and act in your interests.

Our stories in this issue on mobile phone deals and supermarket sales practices are clear examples of the value an independent voice can bring to your decision-making.

Peter Kell
CEO, Australian Consumers' Association



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Photo: Austral Images

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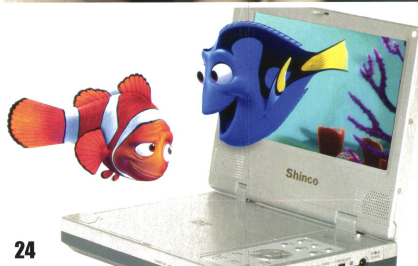
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Antibacterial cleaners: healthier?

Despite the message you might get from advertising, using antibacterial cleaning products probably won't reduce your chances of getting sick.

A recent study (the first to look at actual sickness levels in the home) found that people using antibacterial kitchen sprays, floor cleaners, liquid soap and laundry powder got sick just as often as a group that used regular cleaning products.

The two groups of people in the study (which looked at 238 New York households with at least one preschool child) had the same number of infections on average during the year of the study.

Why? Most household infections are caused by viruses, and antibacterial products act against bacteria, not viruses. So while the products may kill bacteria, you're probably not any less likely to get sick.

The most important factor in preventing illness is personal hygiene — washing and drying your hands — and normal soap is enough to deal with bacteria.

As we've reported before, experts are concerned antibacterial products could help breed resistant bugs. If on top of this they don't even seem to keep you any healthier, it's hard to see any upside in using them.

CORRECTION

PLASMA TV SCREENS

CHOICE, March 2004

On page 15 we referred to dots per inch (dpi) when describing the resolution of plasma screens — for example, 1024 x 1024 dpi. This is incorrect: the numbers are the total pixels for the screen — that is, 1024 x 1024 pixels.

Minimising wood smoke pollution

As many of us living in the southern states start getting jumpers and duvets out for the coming months, a reminder that wood smoke from domestic heating is a major source of air pollution in winter and can affect our health and quality of life. Wood smoke contains a number of noxious gases and fine particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs, where they can cause breathing difficulties, especially in people with asthma and in very young children and frail older people.

If you're looking at replacing your old wood heater or open fireplace with a cleaner form of heating, contact the environment protection agency in your state or territory — in some areas cash incentives of several hundred dollars are offered to help people move towards cleaner heating options.

If you can't replace a wood heater, or it's the only heating source available, you can take steps to reduce the smoke it emits. In a recent NSW study, nearly half the heaters inspected produced more smoke than was necessary, and in most cases this was due to poor operation, lack of maintenance or faulty installation. Installing and using a wood heater properly and cleaning and maintaining it regularly can often eliminate excessive smoke problems.

When you use a wood heater:

- Burn only dry, seasoned hardwood. It's dry if you hear a loud, hollow sound when you tap it with a key or coin. Freshly cut wood, stored under cover, needs eight to 12 months to dry.

- Stack wood loosely in the firebox and fully open the air controls for five minutes before and 15 to 20 minutes after lighting or refuelling the heater. The fire should only smoke for a few minutes when you first light it and when you add extra fuel.

- Don't let the fire smoulder overnight — let it go out, unless the heater's specifically designed for continuous operation.

- Check outside whether the heater is smoking excessively. If so, try increasing the air supply or have it serviced.

Ideally a wood heater should comply with the Australian standard (AS 4013:1999) for pollution emissions. Older heaters are often inefficient and give off more pollutants.

For more information on how to minimise smoke pollution and alternative heating options, contact the environment protection agency in your state or territory.



JACQUE FRY

Beating the blues

The results of a study of two groundbreaking Australian websites show the internet can play a useful role in the management of depression, reports April CHOICE Health Reader.

One of the most effective treatments for milder forms of depression is a type of psychotherapy called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), in which patients are taught to recognise abnormal and negative thought patterns and change their thinking into a more positive frame of mind.

There are several issues with CBT treatment: not everyone comes forward for treatment; not many people know about it; there's a shortage of qualified CBT therapists in some areas; and it's not usually covered by Medicare, making it relatively expensive.

In an attempt to address some of the issues, two Australian sites aimed at people with depression were recently set up — one to educate people about depression (BluePages) and another interactive website offering information about cognitive behaviour therapy (MoodGYM).

A study recently published in the *British Medical Journal* reports on a randomised trial investigating the effectiveness of these sites. 525 internet users with symptoms of depression were allocated to one or other of the sites, or had a placebo intervention. Participants regularly visited the sites for six weeks, after which time they were assessed.

BluePages was found to have significantly improved understanding about treatments for depression and reduced symptoms to some extent, while those who used MoodGYM had significantly improved psychological symptoms compared to the control group receiving the placebo intervention.

Neither site offers itself as an alternative to seeing a health practitioner. The diagnosis and treatment of clinical anxiety and depression require a physician or qualified mental health professional — and the sites recommend you consult one. Nevertheless, this trial shows that online therapy and information have a beneficial role to play and may be a welcome development for those who suffer from depressive symptoms.

More information:

- <http://bluepages.anu.edu.au>.
- <http://moodgym.anu.edu.au>.

Also in this issue of CHOICE Health Reader:

■ Smoking low-tar cigarettes won't necessarily help reduce your risk of dying of lung cancer, according to one study. The US research found no differences in risk for people smoking very low (up to 7 mg), low (8–14 mg) or medium (15–21 mg) tar filter cigarettes. However, their risk was lower than people smoking high-tar (22+ mg) unfiltered cigarettes.

■ A Swedish study found that middle-aged men (over 50) who had good friends to lean on 'during the tough times' had lower rates of heart disease than those with little emotional attachment to others.

To subscribe to CHOICE Health Reader, phone 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.



MERCURY IN FISH

Our food regulator, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), recently warned about the level of mercury in some fish, with advice on species for everyone to eat sparingly, and for pregnant women and young children in particular.

While the mercury level of most fish is low, a small number may accumulate higher levels, and these are the ones we're advised not to eat too much of.

■ Everyone's advised to limit their consumption of shark (flake) and billfish (swordfish, broadbill or marlin) to one serve per week, and to eat no other fish in that week.

■ Pregnant women and young children can safely eat one serve of orange roughy (sea perch) or catfish per week but should eat no other fish in that week. They're also advised to limit their consumption of shark and swordfish, broadbill or marlin to one serve per fortnight and to eat no other fish during that time. Unborn babies are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of mercury.

■ Everyone can safely eat two or three serves per week of any other fish. It's OK to interpret this as, say, a 95 g snack-size can of tuna on most days if you find it convenient, though it's better to get more variety in your diet.

(One adult serve is regarded as 150 g, the equivalent of two frozen fish fillets. One children's serve is 75 g, the equivalent of three fish fingers.)

This advice is based on the most up-to-date research from Australia and overseas. It doesn't mean we should stop eating

fish altogether 'to be on the safe side'. It's a good part of a healthy balanced diet because it's low in saturated fats and high in unsaturated fats, omega-3 oils, protein and iodine.

For more information about mercury in fish, go to the FSANZ website at www.foodstandards.gov.au.



UPDATE

AIR CONDITIONER STAR RATING CHANGED

CHOICE, October 2003

In our last test of air conditioners we found that the LG LST244T-2 didn't meet its claimed cooling efficiency. Our result alerted the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO), which is responsible for the energy star labelling scheme. It tested further samples, confirmed our findings and deregistered the LG model in January 2004. LG has since then re-registered the model with a lower cooling star rating.

Childsafe blinds and curtains

We all know a plastic bag can turn into a death trap for a baby or young child, but did you know that a blind or curtain cord could be just as dangerous? If it's long, looped and dangling close to the cot or play area where a youngster can get hold of it, the cord can act like a noose and strangle the child. So, never tie or knot cords together or leave looped cords hanging loosely within reach of children.

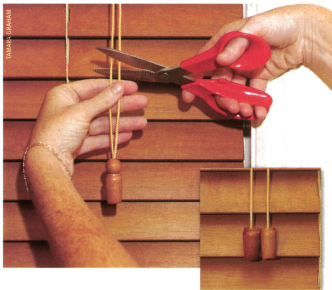
In some states, corded blind and curtains are covered by a mandatory safety standard, which prescribes that all new blinds and curtains with looped cords have to have a special warning label, warning tag and, depending on the design, a safety device attached so you can remove the hazardous loop from the reach of children. Many new blinds in fact now have two single cords rather than a loop.

Other states are currently looking at introducing a similar standard. For the safety of children all over Australia, we'd like to see it adopted in all states and territories.

■ **When you buy new blinds or curtains** to install yourself, read the label and tag and install the safety device according to the instructions if the cord has a loop. With custom-made window coverings, ask the supplier to show you what safety features are available.

■ **To remove the hazard of an existing looped blind cord**, cut it just above the tassel to get rid of the loop (see the photo, left), remove the tassel and equaliser buckle (if any), attach a new tassel to each of the pull-cord ends and knot each cord to hold the tassel. (Alternatively, you can use a 'break-through' tassel that gathers the single cords together but separates them easily if a child puts their neck or body in the loop.)

■ **For cords that require a continuous loop**, attach a cleat to the wall or window frame near the curtains or blinds and wrap the cord around it, or use a tie-down or tension device to pull the cord taut and secure it to the wall or floor.



PREVENTING BURGLARIES

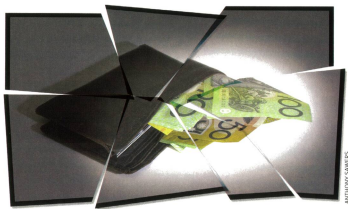
Victorian police have devised a scheme to help reduce the number of burglaries. They'd like to see a new standard introduced for major electrical appliances that would require you to enter a personal identification number (PIN) whenever the appliance is disconnected from power.

This would mean burglars wouldn't be able to sell appliances because potential buyers would know they wouldn't be able to use them — and so there'd be no point stealing them in the first place. A similar system has been operating with car stereo systems and has resulted in a significant decrease in thefts.

Victoria Police are currently working with Standards Australia on the implementation of the PIN concept and are seeking to form a partnership with a manufacturer to bring the concept into reality.



We think it's a great idea, even if it means having to add another PIN to your ever-growing list of numbers to be memorised.



ANTHONY SAWERS

Another retirement home rip-off?

I read with interest your recent article about retirement village rip-offs and offer another example of a recalcitrant retirement home operator.

When my uncle moved from the retirement village to a nursing home, the village operators charged 'deferred management fees'. These included around \$3000 for 'marketing expenses'. But my uncle's villa was resold a week after his move (to their waiting list).

I then wrote to them asking for a cost breakdown of what I suspected was non-existent 'marketing' activity.

The matter was a protracted one. Even in my capacity as the holder of my uncle's power of attorney, I was never able to get a response from the village operator on this breakdown — other than a verbal 'it's covered by the public information document'.

I finally engaged a firm of solicitors familiar with the Retirement Homes Act — they were likewise ignored. The solicitors then contacted the Department of Fair Trading, which directed the village operator to respond with a copy of its 'public information document'.

The request was again ignored and the Department of Fair Trading issued a second directive.

Finally, nearly 10 months after the first letter, the public information document arrived. It stated, in effect, that lessees were entitled to a full costs breakdown for claims like marketing costs.

Suspecting that the village operators would probably offer a whitewash justification of these charges — and that by now our legal costs had far exceeded any benefit — I have reluctantly decided to drop the matter.

While I don't openly accuse the village operator of deliberately delaying their response in the

hope we would just 'go away', one is left to wonder how much of this dubious practice is foisted upon the aged residents of retirement villages.

I C (name supplied)
via email

In most states villages are required to provide certain information upfront, including disclosure documents setting out services, facilities, conditions of entry and fees.

But as this story illustrates, many village operators don't seem to be playing fair. The Retirement Village Association of Australia (RVA) has an accreditation scheme that'll be mandatory for all RVA members from next year. Whether this improves the situation for retirement village residents is something we'll be watching.

It's a two-way street ...

I'd like to comment on your recent article concerning real estate agents. I'm a qualified real estate representative and I can fully appreciate both sides of the story — so I'd like to know when you'll be doing a 'problems with real estate clients' survey.

Real problems you'd find might include:

■ Unrealistic prices — sellers who demand the agent list their homes for a higher price than its actual worth.

THUMBS UP!



■ Penny Stapley
from Birkdale,

Queensland, awards a thumbs-up to **OLDMAC TOYOTA** in Cleveland. In the hot weather recently in Brisbane, Penny became concerned that the coolant level in her car had dropped significantly and left her car there for service. They later rang and told her they could find no fault. When she went to collect her vehicle she was told there'd be no charge — not only that but they'd washed her car too.

■ 'Huge' commissions — I know to the seller the fees may seem unreasonably high but please, before asking the agent to 'discount' their fees, take into consideration the hard work and high cost to the agent to gain qualifications and all the other factors involved in the process of selling your home. Some agents forgo a portion of their hard-earned commission to be able to compete against other agents, or pay for the advertising themselves to make the deal just that bit sweeter for the client. I work seven days a week and most times well into the night to give that 'extra service'. So please, just a little consideration before complaining about fees.

■ And what about all the running around we do for people looking to purchase, only to end up with nothing but a huge petrol and phone bill to show for it?

■ Then there are the clients who just will not accept professional advice — they literally fight you all the way throughout the deal.

So believe me, I'm sure that I and many other agents could fill a book with client horror stories too.

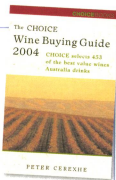
Shirley Cooper
Seville Grove, WA

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to *Thumbs Up* at the address on page 50.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, I C, receives *The CHOICE Wine Buying Guide 2004*, or any other book of their choice from the book catalogue mailed with this issue.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 50 for how to reach us.





AUSTRALIAN PICTURE LIBRARY

With today's major supermarkets becoming even bigger businesses, it's important to understand how they sell, sell, sell.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Don't let loyalty schemes control where you buy** — they're pretty poor value for money. Instead go for good specials or, if money's not an issue, a store that's convenient.
- **And don't let discounted petrol lure you into grocery shopping in the service station's more expensive version of your local supermarket.**
- **Impulse buying accounts for a significant proportion of supermarket purchases** — planning your shopping beforehand and making a list will help you resist.

It wasn't until the 1960s that the supermarket concept really took off in Australia, and by the late '60s the large supermarket chains of the time had captured just over half the grocery market. The days of the local grocer were largely over — Australian retail culture would never be the same again.

Major supermarkets are now just about everywhere, and according to the market research company ACNielsen, the primary appeal is 'one-stop shopping' — everything (almost) you want under one roof.

Apparently we love 'em, but how well do we understand the modern supermarket and its sophisticated sales strategies?

THE CHANGING SCENE

■ **Competitive prices:** The Australian supermarket environment has changed a lot in the past five years or so. FRANKLINS used to be a retail force, particularly in the area of competitive pricing. Since it changed hands, it's shrunk dramatically and no longer seriously rivals the 'big two', COLES and WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY.

The discount chain ALDI arrived — and thrived — in NSW. It recently expanded into the ACT and Victoria and will soon open its first stores in Queensland. Just how strongly ALDI will challenge the dominance of the big two remains to be seen. However, there's an indication it's good for competition, with ALDI prices driving down some prices in nearby supermarkets.

■ **Shopping online:** Avoiding the checkout queues by shopping online was a revolution just around the corner a few years ago. Now many consumers prefer the hassle-free convenience of online shopping, and it's available (for the extra cost of delivery) in most state capitals. (See page 33 for how to go about it if you're new to it.)

■ **More than groceries:** Perhaps one of the biggest changes Australian supermarket shoppers have seen is the major supermarkets' drive to sell more and more different products — witness the growth of petrol and liquor retailing and the push towards instore pharmacies (see *Pharmacies too?*, far right).

Driving this branching-out from grocery retailing are the relatively low profit margins in the traditional grocery sector and demand by

shareholders for continued growth. Expansion into high-margin sectors like liquor makes this possible — and it all keeps you in the shop longer, hopefully spending more money.

PETROL DEALS

Back in 1996, **WOOLWORTHS** was the first supermarket to announce plans to sell petrol, and also the first with a discount offer of four cents per litre for spending \$30 or more at any of its stores. The success of its move into petrol is evidenced by its 11% share of national petrol sales, according to its 2003 annual report.

The move into selling petrol isn't just a diversification into another product: think 'one-stop' shopping again. One retail industry expert said supermarkets see the move as an opportunity to increase 'share of stomach' sales by improving the "poor retail offer by traditional petrol retailers". **COLES** told us that petrol and grocery retailing "are now converging".

What they mean is that when you stop to fill up at their petrol stations, both **COLES** and **WOOLWORTHS** hope you'll also make a few quick grocery 'splurges' at the convenience store there. There's a trap, of course: grocery items tend to cost more at these shops than in a normal supermarket.

But how much are you really saving with the petrol discounts anyway?

In August last year, *Money Magazine* looked into petrol offers and reported that the average motorist uses 32 L of petrol a week (based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data). The magazine calculated that this average motorist would save \$1.30 per week with the discounts — an amount that could easily disappear on one impulse buy.

Make sure the petrol offer works in your favour: get a feel for prices at supermarket petrol outlets, try to resist impulse buys there and don't drive out of your way to collect the 4 ¢/L discount.

When we asked subscribers about fuel discounts, 90% said they wouldn't drive more than 5 km to collect a 5 ¢/L discount — a wise approach, given that the extra fuel used would eat into the saving.

LOYALTY SCHEMES

All loyalty programs are designed to encourage you to buy more in a particular store — and we must fall for them, or the companies wouldn't spend money to run them. **COLES** says that cost-effective — read

profitable — loyalty programs require a 1–2% investment of sale profits.

We'll be taking a close look at the value of loyalty schemes in an upcoming issue of our new magazine, *CHOICE Money & Rights*, but here's a brief rundown of how the major supermarkets reward loyal shoppers.

■ **COLES**: Recently revamped its 'Fly Buys' reward scheme: you now get two points for every \$5 spent. It also introduced 'The Source' **COLES MYER MasterCard**, which attracts Fly Buys points too (one point per \$1 spent). So if you pay for your **COLES MYER** eligible purchases with The Source card and flash your Fly Buys card, you get seven points for every \$5 spent. Rewards start from 10,000 points, and to earn a \$100 **COLES MYER** voucher you need 13,000 points, for which you need to spend approximately \$9000. That's a lot of spending at **COLES** or associated shops.

■ **WOOLWORTHS**: Called 'Ezy Rewards', the program allows shoppers to accrue rewards points when using **WOOLWORTHS Ezy Banking** products (Commonwealth Bank-operated savings or credit accounts). Customers get at least one point for every \$1 spent and need 3600 to earn a \$25 rewards voucher — an even more expensive way to get 'free' goods.

PHARMACIES TOO?

WOOLWORTHS is very keen to have instore pharmacies. It reckons it can do much better for consumers in terms of price than your local pharmacy — and it's probably right. But price isn't the only factor.

Local pharmacists are of course worried that they'll be crushed by the competition, but are also concerned that healthcare will suffer because customers won't have the same opportunities to ask for advice.

When we last surveyed the quality of pharmacy advice in April 1997, we found it to be variable. Nearly half the surveyed pharmacies failed criteria for acceptable practice when our trialists asked for an asthma puffer. However, when they asked for 'something for indigestion', most of the advice given was rated 'excellent' or 'good'.

As we were going to press, the Federal Government said 'no' to pharmacies in supermarkets, but no doubt we'll hear of the idea again in the future.

PAY BY FINGERPRINT

Shoppers in a Seattle supermarket have been able, for the past two years, to pay for their groceries by a biometric fingerprint identification system linked to their savings or credit account. The system is credited by the supermarket with lowering transaction costs and credit card fraud.

Setting the traps

Consumer research shows that we're vulnerable to subtle (and even not-so-subtle) marketing techniques — impulse buying accounts for a significant proportion of supermarket purchases. Here are some of the traditional (as well as a few more unexpected) ploys used by supermarkets to encourage you to spend more than you might have planned to.

■ **In your face:** More expensive items tend to be right in the line of sight of the target consumer. Cheaper or supermarket own-brands tend to be located on the higher or lower shelves.

■ **Sensory delights:** It's very common to position attractive fresh produce or a bakery at the entry. Does the deli section with its medley of colours and tasty offerings then follow? The aim is that the sights and smells grab your interest and put you into shopping mood as you're led through the labyrinth to the less interesting packaged dry goods and the strategically placed impulse-buy items.

■ **Where are the eggs?** Probably nowhere near the milk or bread. Separation of popular staples is a common element of supermarket design. Why? So you'll spend more time in the store negotiating your way past all those flashy and tempting impulse-buy items.

■ **Sacrificial lambs:** Supermarkets, particularly those with strong local competition, offer 'loss leaders' — heavily discounted and advertised goods that are designed to get you into the store. The idea is that you'll pick up a few more items while you're there. And don't be surprised if you find them near high-cost 'glamour' products.

■ **This goes with that:** Positioning 'natural' combinations like chips with dips or biscuits near tea and coffee may seem logical, but is it any wonder that it increases the sales of both?

■ **The trouble with trolleys** is that it's very easy to fill them up. If this is you, consider carrying one or even two baskets

instead — you'll find the weight of all those impulse buys good for discipline.

■ **Super specials?** Appearances can be deceptive. Are those cosmetics in the 'bargain bin' at the end of the aisle really discounted?

■ **Checkout tempters:** Magazines and confectionery live here. How many times have you succumbed to the temptation or been nagged into buying by your kids?

■ Research also suggests that grocery shoppers are heavily influenced by **instore displays**, particularly at the end of the aisles and at the checkout. Keep this in mind when navigating through the store. Don't assume they're automatically a special offer — compare their price with the same items that aren't being promoted.

■ At the Food and Brand Lab, University of Illinois, researchers found that promotions using **multi-unit pricing** (for example, three for \$3), **purchase suggestions** ('stock up for Easter') or with **purchase limits** ('limit three per customer') increased the amount consumers purchased. "All three types of promotion increase purchase amounts by 30% to 105% over what consumers would normally plan on buying," it said.

■ Other research showed that more than 50% of shoppers couldn't resist a **'buy-one-get-one-free'** promotion. But did you even need one in the first place, never mind two?

■ A study published by the American Psychological Association showed that even the choice of **instore music** influenced shoppers' wine selection. Over a two-week period in an English supermarket either French or German music was played from a display of wines from these countries. When the music was French, sales of French wine increased; when it was German, sales of German wine increased. When questioned, shoppers seemed unaware of the effect the music had had on their wine purchasing.

WHO OWNS WHAT

These are the businesses that **COLES MYER** and **WOOLWORTHS** own.

COLES MYER:

- COLES supermarkets.
- Myer (including the former Grace Bros).
- Bi-Lo.
- Kmart.
- Target.
- Megamart.
- Liquorland.
- Harris Technology
- Vintage Cellars.
- Theo's Liquor.
- Officeworks.
- COLES Express Service stations.

WOOLWORTHS:

- WOOLWORTHS and SAFEWAY supermarkets.
- WOOLWORTHS Plus Petrol.
- Big W.
- Food for Less.
- Dick Smith Electronics.
- Dick Smith Electronics PowerHouse.
- Dan Murphy's Liquor.
- Tandy Electronics.
- BWS Beer Wine Spirits.
- First Estate Wine Merchants.
- WOOLWORTHS Liquor



TAMARA CRAWFORD

CALTEX



WOOLWORTHS

Save

4¢ Per Litre

Avoiding the traps

Research indicates that a sizable number of shoppers decide which supermarket they'll shop at based on specials advertised in store catalogues.

It's not a bad shopping strategy, particularly if the specials (these are often the loss leaders noted in *Setting the traps*, left) were items you were intending to buy anyway. Our supermarket price survey last year confirmed this: there's currently so little price competition between the 'big two' supermarkets that choosing where to shop based on specials you need anyway is a cost-saving strategy.

Other tips for smart shopping include:

- Make a shopping list — it's the key to avoiding impulse buying.
- Meal planning also helps you focus on the things you really need.
- Get to know your local supermarket layout well — you'll be able to zero in on the things you really want and ignore tempting distractions. Researchers in the US found that shoppers who were unfamiliar with supermarket layout but had plenty of time had the highest rates of impulse buying. The research suggested this was because you have time to process more in-store information, which promotes unplanned buying.
- Don't go shopping when you're hungry, bored or depressed.

■ Take a calculator or use the CHOICE 'Best Deal Wheel' to make good price comparisons between different pack sizes of the same item — particularly important if something's being promoted in an in-store display that makes you think it'll be cheaper. If you'd like a 'Best Deal Wheel', send a stamped (50 cents) self-addressed envelope (standard business format) to CHOICE Best Deal Wheel, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

■ Don't blindly buy familiar brand names. Try 'no-name' and supermarket own-brands — you'll definitely save money if you can live with any quality difference. Staples like sugar, salt and flour tend to be hard to pick from branded equivalents.

■ If practical, use a basket instead of a trolley, so that you can't load up too much.

■ Supermarkets know kids make great shoppers. If you can't go shopping without them, try and keep their minds off lollies and other temptations by keeping them occupied with learning activities like counting and identifying vegetables and fruits.



Big business, small business and consumers

Associations of independent retailers often complain that the big supermarket chains — COLES and WOOLWORTHS — are squeezing them out of existence. The expansion into petrol and liquor sales is broadening the big two's retail reach even further, bringing with it accusations of predatory pricing and anti-competitive conduct.

For consumers, though, the big two can deliver cheaper prices through economies of scale and efficient supply lines. A 1999 Senate committee found that, "Despite the growth of the major chains, consumers appear to be benefiting from the competitive forces of the current market structure."

And in early February this year, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) found that petrol offers had encouraged competition and lower petrol prices for consumers (see *Petrol deals* on page 9 for more).

However, the 1999 committee's findings did acknowledge that the retail grocery market "is heavily concentrated", which places "significant pressures on small and independent retailers".

More recently, in early March this year, the Senate again looked at the grocery industry and considered the adequacy of the Trade Practices Act to protect small business. The committee recommended various changes to the act to make its intention clearer, but this probably won't be the last word on these complex issues.



IN A NUTSHELL

■ 'Pretty good' was the highest taste rating given — for just one of the 20 meals tasted. Another eight were 'OK' and the rest were mediocre or poor.

■ They're pretty salty, but if you only eat them occasionally you won't ruin the rest of an otherwise balanced diet.



PHOTOS: JAMAKA GORDON

Need to eat

If only life were like the ads, we'd be spoiled for easy frozen meals. As it is ...

When you're hungry and want something instant — at least if you inhabit the world of TV — you only have to look in the freezer, open a packet, microwave for a few minutes and the result is delicious, fresh and tasty.

Sadly most people live in the real world, where our tasters found that most of the frozen meals on test fall far short of TV promises.

Only one out of 20 meals tasted could enthuse our tasters to a rating of 'pretty good'; eight others were rated OK and so are worth a try, but that left the majority as either mediocre or poor.

And don't think our tasters were elitist food snobs — we asked six regular folks, including a couple of regular blokes, all of whom said they'd consider buying freezer meals if they tasted good. Rather than being disgusted by the meals, they were just disappointed they didn't find much they'd include in their shopping trolley.

SATAY

Satay should be a spicy dish, with a sauce based on peanuts with coconut milk. Overall, our tasters weren't impressed with the authenticity of these satays — they found the sauces all too sweet and without much peanut taste.

The top two (**LEAN CUISINE IN A BOWL Satay chicken noodles** and **McCAIN Malaysian satay chicken**) stood out as at least OK: "If I didn't feel like cooking, I'd probably buy it," said one taster, so they're worth a try. But the other three had little to recommend them: "Stale and artificial", "quite awful" and even "like airline food — from a cheap airline", respectively. At least the **McCAIN HEALTHY CHOICE Satay beef** received some praise for its good amount of "tender, soft and flavoursome" meat. But the vegetables in all three didn't come in for much praise: "soggy and mushy" were common themes, with one taster noting that "upon searching, some small pieces of onion were located".

JAPANESE-STYLE/TERIYAKI

A bit more enthusiasm from our tasters for this group — the meals on the whole had a good variety of vegetables and there was a good balance of ingredients (meat, vegetables and noodles/rice). Three are worth a try (see the profiles, page 14) — only two were considered poor.

McCAIN HEALTHY CHOICE Chicken teriyaki with rice was the meal best liked overall and the only one of all the frozen meals on test that raised a 'pretty good' from our tasters — it was "fresh and colourful". It even looked good frozen, according to our kitchen crew. Unfortunately its manufacturer told us just as we were going to press that it's decided to stop making this meal.

and run?

oice of delicious, quick-and-



However, the two meals that weren't liked really came in for some stick from the tasters: *"Too much [sauce] — it looked like a swamp"* and *"artificial and unpleasant"* were two comments directed at **LEAN CUISINE Asian style beef**. And **MAGGI SNACK STOP IN A BOWL Asian style beef with vegetables** was accused of having very small bits of everything: *"Only two bits of a size I had to chew"* and *"the carrot size is so tiny"*.

BUTTER CHICKEN

It's a bit of a worry when the overall feeling about a group of butter chickens is that they're *"not very Indian"*. One of the two best liked — which rated OK — even seemed more Italian than Indian. Another two raised a mediocre and one bottomed out with a poor rating. But none really impressed.

The best of the bunch — as butter chicken seems to go — was **COLES IN A BOWL Butter chicken with rice**. *"Spicy and flavoursome"* was a typical comment. The worst of the lot was **MAGGI SNACK STOP IN A BOWL Butter chicken and rice**: *"Is there meat? — quite elusive"* and *"gummy, not appetising"* was how two tasters saw it. Others just thought it *"bland and boring"*.

THAI GREEN CURRY

The name conjures up an exotic pungency — coriander, mint, basil, garlic, lemongrass, chilli — blended with a richness from coconut milk that these offerings just didn't deliver. A bit salty and not particularly hot was our tasters' overall impression of the Thai green curries on trial — and they thought they all tasted similar.

Two were rated OK, so are probably worth a try — see the profiles for comments. The two curries rated as mediocre seemed to suffer from a lack of taste — not something you normally associate with a Thai curry. **LEAN CUISINE IN A BOWL Thai green chicken curry and rice** was rated the worst, and was the subject of particularly scathing criticism from the tasters. The meat was described as *"tastes a bit like a boiler chicken"*, even looking *"scary ... [from an] unidentifiable source"*. The tasters weren't any more

impressed with its vegetables: *"soft, gluggy"*, *"mushy for the beans and tough for the eggplant"* — and the sauce was simply thought bland.

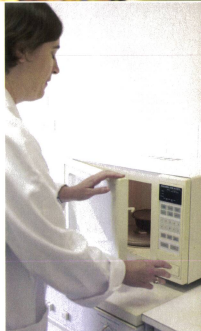
SORT OF HEALTHY

Overall the meals don't get a good score on the taste meter, but most aren't bad from a health viewpoint if you don't eat them every day.

A serve of all but a few of the meals has only one or two teaspoons of fat (5 to 10 grams). A few have about three, but special mention is only really reserved for **McCAIN Thai coconut chicken**, which manages to squeeze in almost 3000 kJ and well over two tablespoons of fat in its relatively smallish 330 g serve.

However, even those of us not watching our salt intake should probably pause before eating these meals regularly: even the lowest in sodium contains not too far off the lower daily recommended limit for adults (920 mg). The meals with the most salt have over half the upper daily limit (2300 mg) — and this is one meal we're talking about here, not a day's worth of three plus snacks.

One interesting thing to note is that there isn't always much nutritional difference between meals claimed to be 'lean' or 'healthy' and some others that make no claim. So don't simply avoid frozen meals with no 'healthy' claim — compare the nutrition panels: they could be quite similar to those 'lite', 'lean' and 'healthy' choices.



WHAT WE TASTED

We checked the major supermarkets for frozen meals and chose four popular categories: satay, Japanese-style/teriyaki, butter chicken and Thai green curry.

A single serve of each meal on test was heated according to instructions and served to each taster. There were six tasters — all ordinary people who had shown their tastebuds to be consistent and discriminating in past CHOICE taste tests.

Once the tasters had tried all the meals in a particular category and recorded their comments, they discussed them and decided which were the standouts, and just how good they were (with a range from 'poor' to 'good'). Each category was tasted on a different day.

Profiles

We couldn't quite stretch to a *What to buy* list, but the profiles are of the meals the tasters rated as OK or better. If you like convenience meals, these are the ones to try first. The prices are typical of those we paid in December 2003/January 2004.

SATAY

LEAN CUISINE IN A BOWL SATAY CHICKEN NOODLES

Price: \$4.86

Taste rating: OK

- Not a lot of chicken, but tender and fresh-looking.
 - Sauce slightly spicy.
 - Lots of noodles compared to chicken and vegetables.
- "Looked real, not processed."
"If I didn't feel like cooking I'd probably buy it."



MCCAIN MALAYSIAN SATAY CHICKEN

Price: \$4.99

Taste rating: OK

- Thick, creamy sauce, which some tasters thought was sluggish.
- "Spicy and fresh."
"Good peanut flavour, but a little salty."

JAPANESE-STYLE/TERIYAKI

MCCAIN HEALTHY CHOICE CHICKEN TERIYAKI WITH RICE*

Price: \$4.95

Taste rating: Pretty good

- The vegetables got the thumbs-up from the tasters.
 - Not a lot of sauce and what there was was a bit salty.
 - Some tasters thought it wasn't like authentic teriyaki.
- "Fresh and colourful. Lots of carrots, overall a good mix with the meat."
"Tasty and well balanced."
"Surprisingly good for a frozen meal."



MCCAIN HEALTHY CHOICE COMBINATION NOODLES

Price: \$4.97

Taste rating: OK

- The three meats (beef, chicken, pork) were OK, but a little salty and bland.
- "Tastes quite pleasant, but fairly bland."

MCCAIN HEALTHY CHOICE STIRFRY CHICKEN WITH HOKKIEN NOODLES

Price: \$4.99

Taste rating: OK

- The chicken was soft, with some bits rubbery or chewy.
 - The vegetables were colourful, but some tasters thought they were a bit mushy.
 - Sauce thick and bland.
- "Sauce too heavy for a stir fry."

BUTTER CHICKEN

COLES IN A BOWL BUTTER CHICKEN WITH RICE

Price: \$4.29

Taste rating: OK

- The meat was tough, rubbery and dry.
 - The meal was saved by its sauce, which got good ratings all round.
- "The meat looked rubbery, processed and grey."
"The sauce is spicy and quite strong – tastes a bit like butter chicken from the Indian takeaway. Spicy and flavoursome."



THAI GREEN CURRY

COLES THAI GREEN CHICKEN CURRY WITH RICE

Price: \$4.79

Taste rating: OK

- Small pieces of chicken and not very many vegetables.
 - The large serving of rice and tasty sauce got the thumbs-up from most tasters.
- "I counted three beans and one piece of capsicum – and a few bean shoots, which were hard to see."
"Very tasty – hot, but not too hot – zesty."



COLES FARMLAND BUTTER CHICKEN

Price: \$2.99

Taste rating: OK

- The tasters thought it was more Italian-style than Indian – quite tomatoey.
 - The meat was a little chewy and dry.
 - The highest in fat of the butter chickens.
- "Not very buttery, more of a tomato taste – zesty."
"Very tomatoey – more pasta sauce than butter chicken; salty, artificial."
"Spicy, tomatoey – more Italian than Indian."



CRAFTY CHEF THAI GREEN CHICKEN CURRY WITH RICE

Price: \$4.48

Taste rating: OK

- Large pieces of firm, tender chicken, although some found it a bit fatty.
 - The fluffy, small-grain rice was a hit, but the oiliness of the sauce wasn't liked.
 - Higher in fat than all but one other green curry.
- "Great taste – just too oily."
"Some runny bits, some sluggish bits and quite oily."



			1 NUTRITION				
Brand and type (in order of taste rating within groups)	Taste rating	% main ingredients	Serve size (g)	Kilojoules (kJ / serve)	Fat (g / serve)	Sodium (mg / serve)	Price (\$)*
SATAY							
LEAN CUISINE In a Bowl Satay chicken noodles	OK	10% chicken	300	1290	8.7	780	4.86
McCain Malaysian satay chicken	OK	15% chicken	320	1677	11.2	768	4.99
LEAN CUISINE Satay beef with rice	Mediocre	14% beef	380	1900	9.5	815	5.16
McCain Healthy Choice Satay beef	Mediocre	21% beef	270	1267	5.1	945	4.59
COLES Beef satay with rice	Poor	15% beef	400	2052	11.6	920	4.79
JAPANESE-STYLE / TERIYAKI DISHES							
McCain Healthy Choice Chicken teriyaki with rice (A)	Pretty good	18% chicken	320	1520	8.0	960	4.95
McCain Healthy Choice Combination noodles	OK	5% chicken; 5% beef; 3% pork	320	1549	9.3	1120	4.97
McCain Healthy Choice Stir-fry chicken with hokkien noodles	OK	14% chicken	340	1677	7.8	1190	4.99
LEAN CUISINE Asian style beef with choy sum and hokkien noodles	Poor	10% beef	350	1240	3.5	1260	5.19
Maggi Snack Stop in a Bowl Asian style beef with noodles	Poor	10% beef	280	1010	2.8	965	3.29
BUTTER CHICKEN							
COLES In a Bowl Butter chicken with rice	OK	15% chicken	300	1500	8.7	915	4.29
COLES Farmland Butter chicken	OK (B)	12% chicken	375	2020	21.0	1330	2.99
Crafty Chef Butter chicken with rice	Mediocre	26% chicken	375	2186	15.8	765	3.98
LEAN CUISINE Indian style butter chicken with rice	Mediocre	15% chicken	370	1990	11.1	685	5.19
Maggi Snack Stop in a Bowl Butter chicken and rice	Poor	10% chicken	280	1680	12.9	755	3.29
THAI GREEN CURRY							
COLES Thai green chicken curry with rice	OK	12% chicken	400	1820	10.4	820	4.79
Crafty Chef Thai green chicken curry with rice	OK	20% chicken	375	1965	17.6	1091	4.48
McCain Thai coconut chicken	Mediocre	15% chicken	330	2993	45.5	660	4.99
Weight Watchers Thai chicken curry	Mediocre	8% chicken	320	1440	7.0	1330	4.98
LEAN CUISINE In a Bowl Thai green chicken curry with rice	Poor	10% chicken	280	1320	8.1	670	4.86

* Prices are typical of what we paid in December 2003/January 2004.

(A) Recently discontinued — see page 12.

(B) OK, but our tasters didn't think it tasted much like butter chicken; they thought its tomato-style sauce more Italian.

1 Nutrition

See Sort of healthy, page 13, for a discussion of how these meals fit into an overall diet.

WHAT'S 'CHICKEN'?

When you look at the percentage of meat in these meals, it generally doesn't look very high (which isn't all bad — it can keep the saturated fat count under control). In fact the meat content ranged from 8% to 26%, with 10%–15% being typical (see table for details).

But what's interesting is that the stated percentage of 'chicken' or 'beef' is often made up of a considerable list of sub-ingredients. For example, **McCAIN Malaysian satay chicken** says it contains 15% chicken. But if you read the label carefully (and know how to interpret the detail) 'chicken' is made from 'chicken, salt, mineral salts (450, 451), sugar, hydrolysed vegetable protein (soy), flavours, potato starch, soy protein, dried glucose syrup (wheat), milk solids, wheat flour, dextrose, yeast extract and flavour enhancer (635)'. It's hard to understand how many of these ingredients can be justified as part of the 'chicken' content.

This is one of the most extreme examples we found, but **McCAIN** does a similar thing on all its other products we looked at. We also found one of the two **MAGGI SNACK STOPS** in the test went down the same track.

It'd be much more helpful to shoppers — and we think more accurate — if the labels declared the percentage of real chicken. We've raised this with the relevant state authorities, which are concerned and investigating. We'll keep you posted.



There was quite a difference in the appearance of the meals — some looked good straight out of the box, while others weren't very appealing and were a far cry from their fancy label picture.

Looking for a good deal on a mobile plan?

We help you work
out what you want,
and give you Best
Buys for different
types of user.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Prepaid services offer the best value for occasional users, while heavy users are likely to be better off with a postpaid plan.
- Look at your call patterns: if you make a lot of calls to a few numbers, or you have a lot of friends on the same network, you can save by looking for a deal that offers free or discount calls — see Discount options, page 18.
- It's easy to let your mobile phone spending spiral out of control, but with a little common sense you can keep it affordable: see Mobile phones and youth debt, page 18.

Before getting down to dollars, there are a few basic (but important) decisions to make. Do you want to use the GSM or CDMA network? Do you want a service that's prepaid or postpaid (a contract with regular bills)? Do you need (or want) a new phone with the plan, or will you bring your own? We discuss the pros and cons of each option below, as well as other things worth considering.

GSM OR CDMA?

The choice between GSM (Global System for Mobile communications) and CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) comes down mainly to the coverage you need in Australia, and whether you need to use your phone overseas. While CDMA is technically superior in many respects, up to now most mobile phone users (92%) have opted for GSM, which offers other advantages.

GSM

- Covers the major population centres of Australia (95% of the population), although actual coverage varies among networks (TELSTRA, OPTUS and VODAFONE). Check the networks' coverage maps to see if the areas where you'll use your phone are covered.
- You can use your phone overseas, although there are limitations: the phone's bandwidth has to be compatible with the system in the country/ies you're visiting, and your phone service provider has to have roaming arrangements there. Plus it's usually expensive.
- Offers greater flexibility in moving between different networks and a greater choice of handsets.

CDMA

- Has better coverage than GSM in rural and remote areas. CDMA replaced the original analogue service, and provides more than twice as much land coverage as GSM, covering 98% of the population.
- CDMA's superior technology allows more users to talk at the same time (which is useful during peak times, such as midnight on New Year's Eve, or during a big public or sporting event); gives better sound quality; more privacy from eavesdroppers; and faster data transmission times (for wireless internet access, say).
- Usually more suitable for use with a hearing aid.
- At this stage you can't use your phone overseas; even though the CDMA system is used in various other countries (including Japan, Hong Kong, New Zealand, the US and Canada), there are no reciprocal roaming arrangements for Australians abroad. However, this may change.
- You can't move between CDMA networks (ORANGE and TELSTRA) with the same handset. However, you should be able to keep it for a move within a network:

for example, from ECOMTEL to SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE, which both use the TELSTRA network.

POSTPAID OR PREPAID?

Do you want to commit yourself to a postpaid service with regular bills, or would you be better off with a prepaid service?

Postpaid

Fixed-term contracts or plans range from one month to 24 months (or occasionally even more), and have a minimum monthly service charge, which usually includes a certain value of calls. They may (but don't necessarily) include the cost of a handset (see right).

- Postpaid plans tend to have cheaper call rates, especially for medium- and higher-usage plans (there are only two prepaid services among our Best Buys for these types of user).

- Costs can escalate out of control — something to consider if you're on a tight budget. Some services offer bill capping (where you nominate a maximum monthly spend), although the minimum cap we found is still quite high.

- If you want to quit a plan early, there may be penalty exit fees.

If your plan includes a number of call credits and you overestimate your mobile usage, you won't use them up; if you underestimate you may end up paying higher per-minute call rates than you would on a heavier-use plan. A tip is to use a prepaid plan first to check your usage — see below.

Before signing up to a long-term plan, think about the length of commitment and minimum total costs; find out if a handset is included in the cost or if it's extra; establish the costs and penalties involved in paying the plan out early, and whether you can change to a higher- or lower-usage plan at any stage.

Prepaid

With prepaid you buy a starter kit (with or without a handset), which gives you access to the phone network and a dollar amount of call credits. When that runs out, you can 'recharge' your call credits and extend network access.

- A prepaid service gives you tight control over call expenditure, and is ideal if you're watching your budget or if the phone's for a youngster.

- If this is your first mobile phone, using a prepaid plan will give you a rough idea of how much you'll use it, so you can estimate more accurately the best service (pre- or postpaid) for the longer term.

- Prepaid tends to be the cheapest option for people who don't make many calls.

- Even if you don't have any call credits remaining, you can still use the phone to make 000 calls and

receive calls for a limited time (possibly up to 12 months — ask providers for details).

- The call credits may expire after a certain time, so use 'em or lose 'em. Some carriers allow you to carry over unused credits, but this is only useful if you've had an unusually quiet month and it won't happen again.

- International roaming isn't available, although VODAFONE plans to introduce it later this year. Another alternative with GSM phones is to buy a prepaid SIM when you get there, which may be cheaper than roaming anyway, although you'll have a different number.

- If you want to go to another network, you may have to pay what amounts to an exit fee (ostensibly a fee for removing SIM security locks). Different networks have different policies — check before you buy.

Look into how and where you can recharge your call credits (with many you can recharge over the phone or web; other ways include going to a dealer outlet, service station, convenience store or ATM); how long the credits are valid; and the minimum recharge amount.

PHONE WITH A PLAN OR BYO?

You have two basic choices when it comes to a handset: bring your own (either one you already have, or a new or secondhand one you've bought outright), or get a new one in association with a plan.

If you're changing from the CDMA to the GSM network or vice versa, you'll definitely need a new phone (BYO or as part of the plan); and possibly also if you're changing from one CDMA service to another (see CDMA, far left).

If you've already got a GSM phone you're happy with and you're staying within the GSM network, you can keep using it.

Some fixed-term plans that offer a particular phone include its price in their monthly charge. With others you can buy a new phone of your choice in monthly instalments, but separate from the plan itself. In both cases you'll have to pay out the price of the phone if you leave the plan early.

If you get a phone with a plan, you're looking at between \$5 and \$50 per month for the phone. If you're buying one outright, prices for new phones range from less than \$100 to over \$1000. Buying secondhand is an option worth considering.

Don't be fooled by ads for \$0 phones — they're usually \$0* phones, and * means you're tied into a fixed-term contract that includes your paying for the phone in instalments for the duration of the plan.

GETTING A GOOD DEAL

After making the basic decisions about the kind of service and handset you want, it's now down to the business end — getting a good deal.

What kind of user are you?

Before looking into the hundreds of deals and packages out there, you need to decide what kind of user you are. We've outlined five scenarios that should cover most people — see *User profiles*, far right. Check them out and see which is most like you.

Discount options

Other things to consider when looking into the details of plans are who you call, when you call and how you call (voice or SMS). Many services offer discounts for same-network calls and cheap rates for nominated numbers, cheap long-distance calls in off-peak times and packages with free or cheap SMS.

Examples include:

- Free or discount calls to users on the same network (OPTUS Chat Time; OPTUS 'Yes' Time; all ORANGE plans; VODAFONE TO VODAFONE; VODAFONE Mates Rates).
- Free or discount calls to other networks' mobiles

or landlines (OPTUS 30 for 10; ORANGE TalkSaver landline options; TELSTRA My Hour option).

- Free or discount SMS to users on the same network (ORANGE JustGo SMS and TalkSaver plans; VIRGIN).
- Free or discount SMS to other/all networks (ORANGE JustGo SMS and TalkSaver plans; VODAFONE Red SIM Free TXT options; TELSTRA 50 Free SMS option).
- Discount rates for nominated phone numbers (VIRGIN Rave Rate; TELSTRA 3 Number Saver option).

We haven't provided an exhaustive list as offers change regularly, and conditions apply to those we've listed. Contact service providers or see their websites for details. (Note also that our Best Buys don't take these discounts into account.)

Changing plans? Keep your old number

If you've decided to change to another network, you'll probably want to keep the same phone number. Transfer your number to your new provider before cancelling your connection with your old provider.

Mobile phones and youth debt

It wasn't so long ago that we were despairing of youngsters' desperate need for the latest gangsta-rapper-hero-endorsed running shoes. Well, it turns out that was nothing. The hundred-odd dollars spent on the occasional pair of sneakers pales in comparison with the hundreds — or in some cases, thousands — of dollars spent these days on today's must-have: mobile phone technology and its associated call costs.

Mobile phones have been identified as a major reason for youth debt — although more often than not it's parents or other guarantors who get lumped with a ginormous bill.

The high cost of SMS is a big part of the problem in this age group. It's not unusual for teenagers to send hundreds of SMS each month — sometimes having protracted "conversations" — and it all adds up. SMS seems cheap, at only 25 cents per message or even less.

However, costs in other countries are less than half this, and considering an SMS only uses a second or so of airtime, the rate here is vastly overpriced.

Then there are premium-rate SMS services (typically 55 cents per message), which people are encouraged to use for voting on reality TV shows and to enter competitions. The growing appeal of MMS (sending pictures, video, etc), which is usually more expensive than SMS, will further challenge tight budgets.

Another concern for young users is the emergence of m-commerce: you use your mobile phone as a de facto charge card for goods and services, and pay when you get your phone bill. Like SMS, the amounts each time might be trivial (a couple of dollars for a soft drink or parking meter payment), but it can amount to a lot at the end of the month.

The best way of avoiding debt problems is to get a prepaid service. Then you only spend when you've got money, and if you've run out you can still use the phone for genuine emergencies (000 calls) and to receive calls.



Other means some companies offer for keeping track of how much you're spending include spend alerts, where you get a message to tell you you've reached your nominated spending level for a given period of time (one month, say), or a toll-free number for checking your account balance. These apply to postpaid services; the latter also to prepaid.

If your kids — or you — send lots of SMS, look to save money with a plan offering cheap SMS or a large 'free' allowance. For GSM services we found VODAFONE and VIRGIN tend to offer the best deals for this market (see *Best Buys: SMS* *freedom*, far right, for some good deals).

And finally, resist the urge to have SMS conversations: "where r u" — "@ bus stop" — "wen will u b here" — "in 10" — "c u then!" — "gr8!" — "ciao" — "bye". Scintillating stuff, and no doubt mildly entertaining, but worth about \$1 of calls each? Probably better to just call — or simply w8.

BEST BUYS

For each user type we've listed a range of good-value packages for both GSM and CDMA networks, including prepaid and postpaid services as available. We've further divided the results into deals that include buying a new phone and deals where you bring your own.

To see how we chose the Best Buys, see *How we got our information*, page 21, and for factors we couldn't include when working them out, see *Limitations of the Best Buys*, page 21.

USER PROFILES

We devised five representative user scenarios and checked out Best Buys for them, based on their cost per month:

- Emergency user.
- SMS freak.
- Low user.
- Medium user.
- High user.

Check the user profiles under each category to see which best fits your mobile phone usage pattern.

NOTES

- Prices are rounded up to the nearest 10 cents.
- The time period indicated in brackets for postpaid services is the minimum contract period. A one-month plan simply means you join up and pay by the month; there's no other minimum time commitment. If no time period is indicated, there's no minimum period.
- Where there's a choice, for example 12 or 24 months, taking the 24-month option will allow you to spread your handset repayments over this longer period of time (so you pay less each month).



EMERGENCY USER

USER PROFILE: Only five minutes of outgoing calls per month. The phone is mainly used to receive calls, and to make calls only when there's some urgency.

GSM — BYO phone

Prepaid

- VIRGIN Mobile \$15 Recharge card: \$3.80
- VIRGIN Mobile \$50 Recharge card: \$4.20 (A)
- TELSTRA Mobile Prepaid account: \$4.30
- AAPT Pre-Paid: \$5.00 (A)
- VIRGIN Mobile \$30 Recharge card: \$5.00 (A)

GSM — Phone with plan

Prepaid

- VIRGIN Mobile \$15 Recharge card: \$3.80 (+ cost of handset (B))
- VIRGIN Mobile \$50 Recharge card: \$4.20 (A) (+ cost of handset (B))
- AAPT Pre-Paid: \$5.00 (A) (+ cost of handset (B))
- VIRGIN Mobile \$30 Recharge card: \$5.00 (A) (+ cost of handset (B))

CDMA — BYO phone

Prepaid

- TELSTRA Mobile Prepaid account CDMA: \$4.10
- SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE Freedom Advantage: \$2.80
- SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE Freedom One: \$4.50
- BENDIGO COMMUNITY TELCO \$5 plan (1 month): \$5.00
- TELSTRA Mobile \$5 plan — CDMA (12/24 months): \$6.40

CDMA — Phone with plan

Postpaid

- SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE Freedom One: \$4.50 (+ cost of handset (B))

SMS FREAK

USER PROFILE: This is a likely teenager scenario. The call volume is relatively low (30 minutes per month, mainly off-peak), but the user sends 200 SMS a month.

GSM — BYO phone

Prepaid

- VODAFONE Red SIM 50 TXT option: \$50.00 (A)
- VODAFONE Red SIM 30 TXT option: \$56.40
- VIRGIN Mobile \$100 Recharge card: \$58.60

Postpaid

- VIRGIN Mobile BYO 50 (1 month): \$54.60
- VIRGIN Mobile BYO 30 (1 month): \$58.10

GSM — Phone with plan

Prepaid

- VIRGIN Mobile \$100 Recharge card: \$57.40 (+ cost of handset (B))
- VIRGIN Mobile \$50 Recharge card: \$58.60 (+ cost of handset (B))
- VIRGIN Mobile Dial High Club — Level 50 (1 month): \$54.60 (C)
- VIRGIN Mobile Dial High Club — Level 30 (1 month): \$58.10 (C)

CDMA — BYO phone

Postpaid

- BENDIGO COMMUNITY TELCO \$5 plan (1 month): \$59.00
- SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE Freedom Advantage: \$59.25

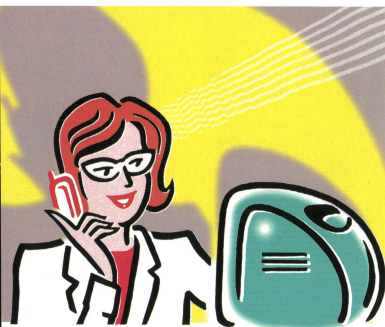
- ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 30 CDMA: \$62.90
- ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 40/60 CDMA: \$62.60

CDMA — Phone with plan

Postpaid

- ORANGE Just Go SMS (12 months): \$36.40 (+ cost of handset (B)) (D)
- ORANGE TalkSaver 28 + mobile rate saver option: \$40.00 (+ cost of handset (B)) (D)
- ORANGE TalkSaver 45 (with or without mobile rate saver option): \$45.00 (+ cost of handset (B)) (D)
- ORANGE TalkSaver 28 : \$47.20 (+ cost of handset (B)) (D)





LOW USER

USER PROFILE: The call volume is relatively low (30 minutes per month, mainly off-peak), and the user sends five SMS a month.

GSM — BYO phone

Prepaid

- AAPT Pre-paid: \$16.50
- VIRGIN Prepaid \$100 Recharge card: \$18.40

Postpaid

- AAPT Go Direct 40 (3 months): \$17.00
- AAPT Go Direct 30 (3 months): \$17.60
- RSLCOM Mobile Free Spirit \$10 plan: \$18.10

GSM — Phone with plan

Prepaid

- AAPT Pre-paid: \$16.50 [+ cost of handset (B)]
- VIRGIN Mobile \$100 Recharge card: \$18.40 [+ cost of handset (B)]
- VIRGIN Mobile \$50 Recharge card: \$19.60 [+ cost of handset (B)]

Postpaid

- TELSTRA Mobile \$10 plan (12/24 months): \$19.90 [+ cost of handset (B)]
- TELSTRA Mobile \$20 plan (12/24 months): \$20.00 [+ cost of handset (B)]

CDMA — BYO phone

Postpaid

- BENDIGO COMMUNITY TELCO \$5 plan (1 month): \$11.90
- SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE Freedom Advantage: \$16.40
- TELSTRA Mobile Plan 20 CDMA (12 months): \$18.70
- TELSTRA Mobile Plan 10 CDMA (24 months): \$19.90
- TELSTRA Mobile Plan 10 CDMA (12 months): \$20.00
- TELSTRA Mobile Plan 20 CDMA (24 months): \$20.00

CDMA — Phone with plan

Postpaid

- ORANGE Just Go SMS (12 months): \$15.00 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)
- ORANGE Just Go (12/24 months): \$15.50 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)
- OPTUS 'Yes' Connect CDMA 20 (24 months): \$20.00 [+ cost of handset (B)]

MEDIUM USER

USER PROFILE: 90 minutes of calls per month, mainly off-peak, plus 15 SMS.

GSM — BYO phone

Postpaid

- AAPT Mobile Go Direct 60 (3 months): \$38.00
- AAPT Mobile Go Direct 40 (3 months): \$42.50
- ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 40: \$45.90
- ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 30: \$46.80
- AAPT Mobile Go Direct 80 (3 months): \$47.00

GSM — Phone with plan

Prepaid

- AAPT Mobile Pre-paid: \$49.20 [+ cost of handset (B)]

Postpaid

- AAPT Mobile Go Direct 40 — Nokia 6100 (24 months): \$42.60 (C)
- B Clear & Simple B in Focus Super Saver 49 (28 months): \$49.00 (C)
- TELSTRA Mobile \$40 plan (12/24 months): \$49.20 [+ cost of handset (B)]
- AAPT Mobile Go Direct 40 — Nokia 7250i (24 months): \$50.00 (C)
- VIRGIN Mobile Dial High Club — Level 50 (1 month): \$50.00 (C)

CDMA — BYO phone

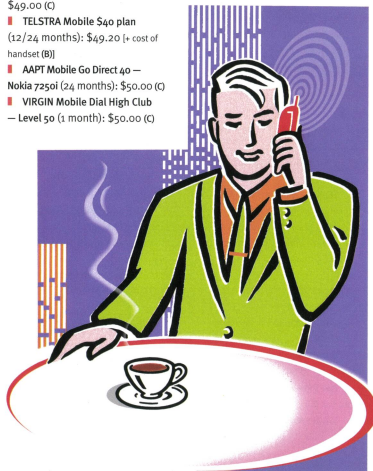
Postpaid

- BENDIGO COMMUNITY TELCO \$5 plan (1 month): \$34.50
- ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 40 CDMA: \$45.90
- ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 30 CDMA: \$46.80
- SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE Freedom Advantage: \$48.10

CDMA — Phone with plan

Postpaid

- ORANGE Just Go SMS (12 months): \$43.70 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)
- OPTUS 'Yes' Connect CDMA 30 (24 months): \$44.10 [+ cost of handset (B)]
- ORANGE TalkSaver 45 + mobile rate saver option: \$45.00 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)
- ORANGE Just Go (12/24 months): \$45.40 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)
- ORANGE Capped 49 plan (12/24 months): \$49.00 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)





HIGH USER

USER PROFILE: Likely to be a business user, 180 minutes of calls, mainly peak, plus 30 SMS.

GSM — BYO phone

Prepaid

■ VODAFONE Red SIM 50 Call option: \$79.50

Postpaid

■ AAPT Go Direct 80 (3 months): \$84.70

■ B Clear & Simple B Valued 75 (12 months): \$90.10

■ ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 40/60/80: \$91.40

GSM — Phone with plan

Postpaid

■ AAPT Mobile Go Direct 80 — Nokia 7250i (24 months): \$82.60 (C)

■ TELSTRA Mobile \$60 plan (12/24 months): \$94.30 [+ cost of handset (B)]

■ TELSTRA Mobile \$80 plan (12 months): \$94.30 [+ cost of handset (B)]

■ B Clear & Simple B Super Saver 55 (24 months): \$94.70 (C)

■ AAPT Mobile Go Direct 60 — Nokia 6100 (24 months): \$95.20 (C)

■ AAPT Mobile Go Direct 60 — Nokia 7250i (24 months): \$95.20 (C)

■ B Clear & Simple B In Focus Super Saver 49 (28 months): \$95.40 (C)

(A) Actual call costs are less but this is what the plan will cost you anyway — see the notes on credit expiry time under Limitations (above right) for more on this.

(B) Call costs only — doesn't include the upfront or instalment payment for the handset.

(C) '\$60' handset provided, which means the cost is included in the price quoted here, so you pay for the handset over the term of the contract. If you leave before the phone's paid off, you have to pay the outstanding amount owing on it. Where a phone model is indicated, that's what you get. Otherwise, you may have a choice.

(D) All Orange plans are only available for users living in Sydney, Melbourne, Geelong, Gosford, Newcastle or Wollongong. If you're travelling outside these areas, your Orange phone automatically uses the Telstra network. Generally you can make and receive calls as usual; however, there may be extra costs on some services for some plans — check with Orange for details.

CDMA — BYO phone

Postpaid

■ BENDIGO COMMUNITY TELCO \$5 plan (1 month): \$86.80

■ ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 40/60/80 CDMA: \$91.40

■ ECOMTEL Residential Mobile Service Plan 30 CDMA: \$93.20

■ TELSTRA Mobile Plan 60/80 CDMA (12/24 months): \$94.30

■ SOUTHERN CROSS MOBILE Freedom Advantage: \$95.80

CDMA — Phone with plan

Postpaid

■ ORANGE TalkSaver 60 + mobile rate saver option: \$72.70 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)

■ ORANGE TalkSaver 80 + mobile rate saver option: \$80.00 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)

■ ORANGE Capped 49 plan (12/24 months): \$82.10 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)

■ ORANGE Just Go SMS (12 months): \$87.10 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)

■ ORANGE TalkSaver 45 + mobile rate saver option: \$87.10 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)

■ ORANGE TalkSaver 80: \$87.10 [+ cost of handset (B)] (D)

How we got our information

We used **Phonechoice** (no relation of CHOICE), a free web-based service that aims to provide objective and independent information to consumers on a wide range of phone-related goods and services. To work out the best deals we entered the typical call patterns of the user types into the **Phonechoice** calculator. It gave us an estimated monthly cost for each scenario for all applicable deals currently available. We picked the cheapest as our Best Buys, covering all potential combinations of CDMA versus GSM, pre- versus postpaid and new phone versus BYO.

You can try the calculator yourself on your free CHOICE website: go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on 'mobile phone calculator' in the index.



Limitations of the Best Buys

Our results are a good starting point in your search for the best deal. However, there are several limitations, plus you need to check the exact terms and conditions of any option you're interested in.

■ The **Phonechoice** calculator we got our phone plan information from doesn't take **billing increments** into account. All other things being equal, a service with per-second billing is cheaper than one that bills in 30-second blocks.

■ For prepaid services you need to take **credit expiry time** into account. For example, **VODAFONE Red SIM \$100** offers very cheap call rates, but you have to recharge it with \$100 every 30 days to get these rates. This means it's not suitable for low or even medium-level use.

However, sometimes the credit expiry time doesn't make a big difference to monthly costs for low-level users, especially if it's a long one. A **VIRGIN \$30 Recharge Card**, for example, has an expiry time of six months, so it effectively costs \$5 a month — even if you make fewer than \$30 worth of calls over the six months.

■ **Starter kits** for prepaid services aren't included, because they're only valid for a limited time.

■ Our call cost estimates don't take **discounts** (see page 18) into account, because they depend on whom you call and when — and the discounts offered are always changing. Generally speaking, choosing the same network as friends or family, or using the phone almost exclusively in off-peak times, can substantially reduce the costs we've published.

■ Scenarios don't include **international calls and roaming**, or **MMS** (sending pictures, video, etc.). If these are important to you, check the rates with service providers.

■ For **phone-with-plan scenarios** (as opposed to BYO phone), there may be an additional monthly cost for instalments on the phone (footnote B) or it may already be included in the price listed (footnote C). The amount of this extra cost depends on the type of handset you choose.

■ A good deal with another network or plan might not be such a good deal if you have to pay out your current contract, pay exit fees and/or get a new phone.

■ Finally, **plans and services change regularly** — while we checked with providers close to publication, there's no guarantee the published deals will be available for very long, and better deals may have come up since going to press.

MedicarePlus

What's in it for consumers?

IN A NUTSHELL

■ While the new safety net will help a few people, most will never use enough health services to qualify for it and so will gain nothing from MedicarePlus. The scheme does nothing to help restore bulk-billing, a crucial aspect of a universal healthcare system.

The Government's MedicarePlus package recently passed through the Senate after the four independent senators did a deal over the scheme.

While there isn't much in this package for people who only see a GP a couple of times a year, there are some new measures to protect people with a chronic illness or families who have a lot of health expenses in any one year.

GP and specialist visits, MRI and CT scans and some other diagnostic tests can add up to a lot of money that people have to pay out of their own pockets. There's a new safety net to protect consumers in this position: the annual threshold to qualify will be \$300 for Commonwealth concession card holders and family tax beneficiaries and \$700 for everybody else.

Once the safety net's been reached the government will meet 80% of the cost of any gap between the fee charged by the doctor and the Medicare rebate. So, for example, if your GP charges \$40, Medicare covers \$25 and you pay a gap of \$15. If you've reached the safety net, you'll pay only 20% of the gap — in this case \$3.

If you have a Medicare card you'll be automatically registered with the Health Insurance Commission, which will keep track of all your medical bills and notify you by letter when you're close to reaching the safety net threshold. If you want the \$300/\$700 threshold to apply to your family as a whole rather than to each individual member, however, you'll need to register as a family. Registration forms are available online at www.hic.gov.au or you can call the MedicarePlus information line on 1800 011 163 for a form.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE ...

People with a chronic illness will also have free access to some limited allied health services under Medicare. GPs can refer people for dental care, physiotherapy, podiatry, optometry and a range of other allied health services.

Note that these services won't be broadly available — you won't just be able to go to your GP and ask for a referral to a physio or dentist. A GP will only be able to make referrals for people with chronic and complex health needs, where dental or allied health might be needed to treat a problem that is 'significantly exacerbating' their medical condition.

Doctors will also be paid extra to bulk-bill children and concession card holders: an extra \$5 if you live in a city or \$7.50 if you live in a rural area or Tasmania. So if you have children or are a concession card holder it might be worth asking your doctor if they'll bulk-bill you.

CHOICE'S VERDICT

Most people will never use enough health services to qualify for the safety net — only about 450,000 each year by government estimates — but it does provide some protection for people with a chronic illness or unexpectedly high health costs. However, the Government has missed an opportunity to restore bulk-billing, which is a key part of Medicare and a universal healthcare system.

CHOICE's view is that consumers are best served by restoring a system where most GP consultations are bulk-billed. A safety net doesn't help people who can't find the once-off \$40 or so they need to see a doctor who doesn't bulk-bill.

There are also concerns about the long-term costs of the scheme. By tying the level of government rebate to whatever medical fees are charged, regardless of how much they are, there's not much incentive for doctors to control their costs. The taxpayer is at the mercy of an extremely well paid profession (particularly specialists). A cost blow-out seems likely and a cynic might ask how much the introduction of the scheme has to do with the approaching federal election.

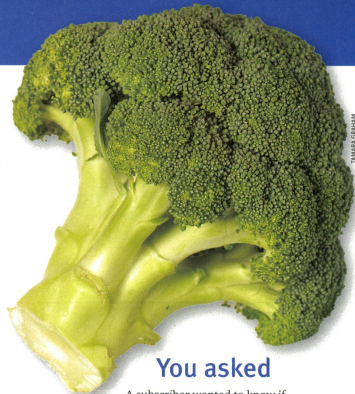
SHAME, SHAME, SHAME

A restaurant owner in the US has invented a device designed to shame patrons into washing their hands after they've been to the toilet. After years of witnessing people not doing so, he developed an electrical device that broadcasts a message triggered by the flush of the toilet, which says: "Please wash your hands."

CHOICE has reported in the past on the poor hygiene and food-handling records of some food businesses. Perhaps a device like this would also assist in cutting rates of food poisoning caused by the poor hygiene practices of those preparing your food.



TAMARA GRAHAM



TAMARA GRAHAM

You asked

A subscriber wanted to know if microwave cooking is bad news, after reading a report in *New Scientist*. It described a study that concluded steaming is by far the best way to cook vegetables and microwaving the worst, as it eliminated antioxidants such as flavonoids in the broccoli the study authors cooked.

Antioxidants protect our cells from damage by getting rid of highly reactive chemicals called free radicals, reducing the risk of cancer and degenerative diseases. So it's beneficial to our health if the vegetables we eat retain as many antioxidants as possible during cooking.

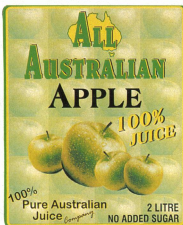
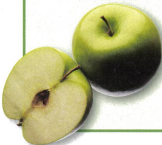
Fortunately, flavonoids are quite robust compounds, not easily destroyed. Which is why we're sceptical about the conclusions of this study — particularly as the broccoli was steamed for a mere 3.5 minutes, compared with cooking it in a 1000-watt microwave for five minutes.

We'll be waiting to see if others repeat the work before we wave goodbye to the microwave for cooking our vegies.

SHE'S APPLES

In CHOICE, July 2003, *The Hard Word* highlighted the small print revealing that this "All Australian" juice was actually "manufactured from a blend of Australian and imported quality fruit juices" (see the label on the right).

While the new improved branding (far right) doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, at least it now accurately represents the product.



Movies on the move

A portable DVD player has lots of uses, from keeping the kids quiet to taking movies to friends.

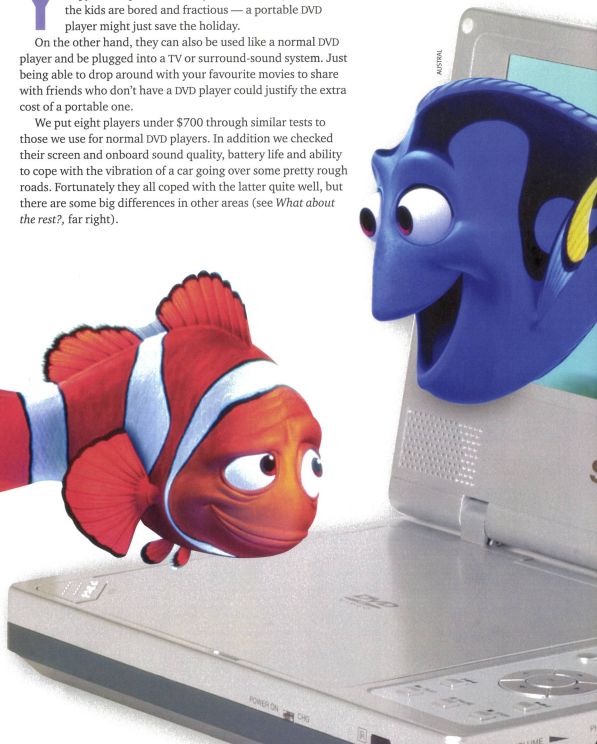
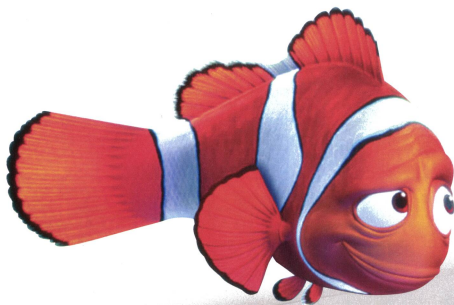
IN A NUTSHELL

- Sound from the onboard speakers is weak and tinny — you'll need headphones if you don't feed it through a sound system or TV.
- Their LCD screens vary in quality, aspect ratio and size and none has a resolution as high as a normal LCD computer screen.
- They all handle bumps well so should be fine on long trips.

You're not far into that long holiday trip. You've played 'I spy' to the point where it just isn't fun any more and the kids are bored and fractious — a portable DVD player might just save the holiday.

On the other hand, they can also be used like a normal DVD player and be plugged into a TV or surround-sound system. Just being able to drop around with your favourite movies to share with friends who don't have a DVD player could justify the extra cost of a portable one.

We put eight players under \$700 through similar tests to those we use for normal DVD players. In addition we checked their screen and onboard sound quality, battery life and ability to cope with the vibration of a car going over some pretty rough roads. Fortunately they all coped with the latter quite well, but there are some big differences in other areas (see *What about the rest?*, far right).



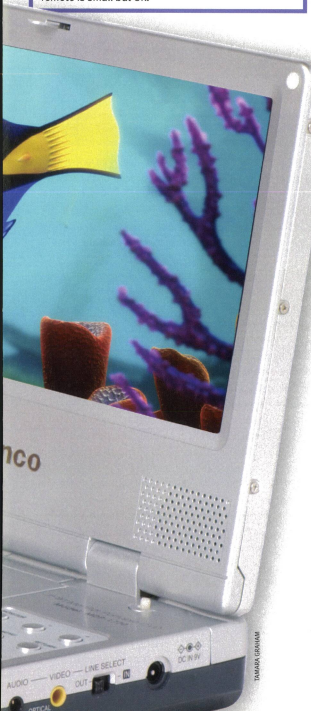
WHAT TO BUY

SHINCO MDP-1770

\$599

As well as being the best model overall, it's equal best for picture quality and best for sound. It's also reasonably easy to use, handles faulty discs well, has the longest battery life in the test and is the lightest of the models to carry around (it's shown in the photo below).

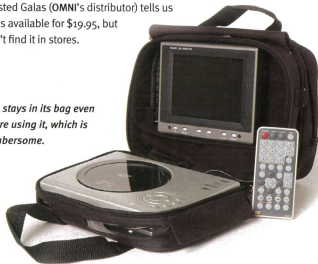
Unfortunately you can't adjust the picture when you're using an external screen, it doesn't have an S-video output and its menus are in English only. Its remote is small but OK.



WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- Picture quality isn't a strong point for most of the products in this test. The **LUMINAURA** is as good as the **SHINCO**, but neither has a resolution as high as a normal LCD computer screen. The **ZANON** is particularly poor.
- All the players in this test (including the **SHINCO**) suffer from pretty weak and tinny sound if you're using the onboard speakers. The **ZANON** speakers are mono and are the worst. Generally, the sound quality improves if you're listening through good-quality headphones, except for the **OMNI** and **TELEFUNKEN** — their overall sound score is low because the output from their headphone sockets is only slightly better than via the onboard speakers.
- None of them is particularly difficult to use. The **ZANON** is bulky and in a bag that needs some support when open (see the photo below). It also lacks onboard navigation buttons, so you have to use the remote control for this. The **VOXSON** has no onboard 'pause' key, so you have to use the remote control if you want to stop for a short time. Some of the others also lack some basic features, listed in *What to look for* and *Features they (almost) all have*, pages 26 to 27.
- Most handle faulty CDs and DVDs quite well. Our test discs have a series of scratches and marks that range from quite minor to pretty extreme. The **LUMINAURA** couldn't play the faulty CD very well at all; it managed the faulty DVD better, but not as well as most of the others. The worst for the DVD was the **CENTREX**, which didn't play it well. Its overall faulty disc handling score is boosted because it had no trouble with the CD.
- We timed how long the battery lasts for those that supply one, and they're all adequate for most situations. However, the **CENTREX**, **TELEFUNKEN** and **LUMINAURA** might not make it through a very long movie, so you'd have to resort to mains power or their car power connections (such as the cigarette lighter socket).
- The **CENTREX** and **ZANON** have 4:3 format screens, which seems odd for a device designed to play DVDs that are often in widescreen 16:9 format. All except the **CONIA** have PAL output — the TV system that's used in Australia. The **CONIA** only has NTSC output, so you'll need a TV that can convert the NTSC signal to PAL if you want to use it as a normal DVD player. It plays PAL DVDs.
- You need a special AV cable to attach the **OMNI** and **TELEFUNKEN** to a normal TV. Prima (**TELEFUNKEN**'s distributor) will sell you one direct for \$15. It's included when you buy the latest version of the **OMNI**; for the version tested Galas (**OMNI**'s distributor) tells us the cable is available for \$19.95, but we couldn't find it in stores.

The Zanon stays in its bag even when you're using it, which is rather cumbersome.



TAMARA GRAHAM

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE						7 FEATURES				
	1 Overall score (%)	2 Picture quality score (%)	3 Sound quality score (%)	4 Ease of use score (%)	5 Faulty disc handling score	6 Battery life (minutes)	One-touch skip DVD / CD*	Slow- motion playback	Programmed play mode	S-video output	Carry bag supp
SHINCO MDP-1770	79	80	78	68	90	230	- / -	✓	✓		✓
OMNI DV-966VW (A)	70	70	49	71	90	na	- / ✓		✓		✓
TELEFUNKEN TDV1763	70	70	49	71	90	140	- / ✓		✓	✓	✓
CONIA CPD 71	69	60	68	62	95	220	- / -	✓	✓	✓	
CENTREX CTPD500	65	60	75	60	70	135	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
LUMINAURA PDV-2000W	65	80	62	70	33	150	- / -	✓		✓	
VOXSON DVD-ZK8	65	55	70	62	85	200	✓ / -	✓			✓
ZANON M-BAG56	57	40	60	56	90	na	- / -	✓	✓	✓	✓

* Back to the start of the current DVD chapter/CD track.

** Rounded up to the next 5 mm, all protruding parts except the cord included, the unit closed, and the battery pack attached if supplied. The Zanon's dimensions include the bag.

† Rounded to the nearest 0.1 kg, battery pack attached if supplied. The Zanon's weight includes the bag.

‡ Prices are recommended retail, as supplied by manufacturers in February/March 2004.

na Not applicable — no battery supplied.

ns Not stated.

(A) Discontinued but might still be available in shops. The distributor says the new version is supplied with a battery pack and an AV cable to connect to your TV. See What about the rest?, page 25, for more on this.

(B) Requires a special cable, which is not included and may be hard to find. Prima (Telefunken's distributor) will supply one direct for \$15.

(C) One year on parts and 90 days on labour.

(D) One year on unit, AC-DC adaptor and battery pack; three months on remote control.

What to look for

LCD screen: Make sure the screen is big enough to allow viewing from a reasonable distance — some of the smaller screens in this test could be too small for some people. 16:9 format is best because most DVD movies are in a widescreen format, and on a 4:3 screen they'll be even smaller than the already small screen.

All LCD screens have limited viewing angles, so it's best to try before you buy to see if you can cope with this restriction. Use a movie with dark scenes and pay careful attention to the vertical as well as the horizontal angles and look out for jagged edges or strange colours.

Sound options: As noted, the sound quality from the onboard speakers for all players in this test can be described as ranging from just about OK down to not very good. You'll probably want to use headphones if you're watching in a car or other noisy environment (see the table for sound scores, which include listening and technical sound tests).

If you're thinking of using the player in your lounge room, you'll need a digital sound connection to a surround-sound system, or a normal left and right channel output to connect directly to your sound system or TV (mono TVs may need an adaptor). All the models in this test have these connections, but none has the option of a six-channel output, which would be handy for surround-sound systems that can't handle digital signals.

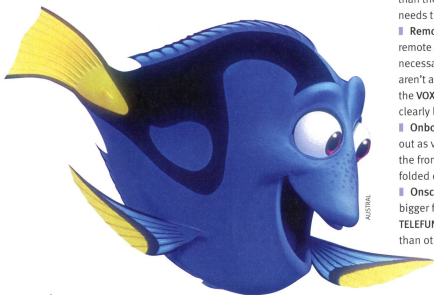
Battery/power options: If it doesn't come with a battery, check you can buy one separately. All in this test come with an AC mains to DC converter and a car adaptor.

Video connections: None of the players in this test has component video output, which gives the best picture quality, but only the OMNI, SHINCO and VOXSON are missing an S-video connection. If you're going to use one as a normal DVD player S-video will provide better-quality pictures than the composite video output they all have, but of course your TV needs the appropriate input too.

Remote controls: In this test they're all smaller than a regular DVD remote and some aren't much bigger than a credit card. This isn't necessarily a good thing because as they get smaller, labels generally aren't as clear and buttons are closer together. The best in this test was the VOXSON's, which is a bit larger than the others with well spaced and clearly labelled buttons.

Onboard controls: Most rate OK to good, but the LUMINAURA stands out as very good because they're clearly labelled, well spaced and on the front edge of the unit, so they're accessible even when the screen is folded down.

Onscreen menus: Because they all have a small screen, we found the bigger font size and style used on the LUMINAURA, OMNI, SHINCO and TELEFUNKEN make their onscreen indicators and menus easier to read than others. However, they all have well organised menu systems.



		SPECIFICATIONS						
Rechargeable battery pack included	8 Screen aspect ratio	Screen diagonal (measured, cm)	Dimensions (H x W x D, mm)**	Weight (kg)†	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price (\$)‡
✓	16:9	17.5	45 x 190 x 180	1.0	1 (C)	China	Shinco	599
(A)	16:9	16.5	50 x 245 x 165	1.2	1	China	Galas	499
✓	16:9	16.5	50 x 245 x 210	1.4	1	China	Prima	599
✓	16:9	17.7	50 x 190 x 160	1.3	1	China	Pebble	499
✓	4:3	12.6	45 x 155 x 195	1.1	1	China	Centrex	349
✓	16:9	17.6	45 x 175 x 225	1.2	ns	Taiwan	Digichain	699
✓	16:9	17.8	50 x 200 x 150	1.1	1 (D)	China	Voxson	499
	4:3	14.2	150 x 250 x 210	2.0	1	Hong Kong	Deep Media	480

1 Overall score

This is made up as follows:

- Picture quality: 40%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Faulty disc handling: 20%

These scores provide comparisons between these portable DVD players only. For example, their picture and sound quality aren't comparable with other audio-visual products.

2 Picture quality score

We checked for brightness level, grey scale, sharpness, detail, straightness of lines and edges, centring, colour delineation and tinge. For movies we specifically looked for colour, brightness, image smoothness and detail.

3 Sound quality score

We listened to the sound through the built-in speakers and through a good pair of headphones. We also measured level linearity, total harmonic distortion, signal-to-noise ratio and channel separation through the analogue stereo output sockets and headphone socket. Listening and technical tests are rated equally.

4 Ease of use score

We performed various 'actual use' tasks following the instruction manuals. If a task could be done with little or no use of the instructions, the model scored better. We looked at:

- Front panel controls.
- Remote control.
- Onscreen display and menus.
- Programming CD and DVD playback.

5 Faulty disc handling score

We used a standard test CD with interruptions on the data surface and black dots on the readout surface to simulate scratches and dirt respectively. We also created a similarly damaged DVD with deep scratches and large black dots — more damage than you'd normally encounter.

6 Battery life

This is the DVD movie playback time measured on a full charge of the battery, for those with a battery supplied.

7 Features

See *Features they (almost) all have*, left, for more on these and other features.

8 Screen aspect ratio

The proportional shape of the player's screen, width: height. 16:9 is the widescreen format many DVDs have; 4:3 is the format of a conventional TV screen.

Features they (almost) all have

- Composite video output socket.
- Stereo audio and digital audio output sockets for stereo, AC3 (Dolby Digital) and DTS capability.
- Composite video and stereo audio output sockets that can be switched to enable alternative use as input sockets (except the CENTREX). Handy if you want to watch a video you've captured with a camcorder, say.
- Earphone/headphone output socket/s.
- Mains AC-DC supply adaptor and car DC supply adaptor.
- Can play DVDs, CDs and VCDs.
- Can play recordable and rewritable CDs (audio and MP3) and DVDs (except for the LUMINAURA, which can't play DVD RW).
- Australia is in Region 4. All these models can also play Region 3 DVDs (East Asia including Hong Kong). All except the LUMINAURA, OMNI and TELEFUNKEN played a Region 1 DVD (US, Canada and US territories) in our tests; OMNI sent instructions for changing region code settings.
- Volume control.
- 4:3 letterbox, 4:3 pan and scan, and 16:9 widescreen shape settings.
- NTSC DVD playback produces a PAL TV-compatible output (except the CONIA — see *What about the rest?*, page 25, for more).
- Adjustments or choices of picture settings (except the SHINCO can't adjust picture settings on an external screen).
- Skip to the start of the previous or next DVD chapter/CD track.
- Fast play forward and reverse.
- Still/pause.
- Zoom and pan.
- A to B repeat (except the LUMINAURA).
- Repeatedly play a DVD title or chapter, and an entire CD or just one of its tracks (except the LUMINAURA).
- Selectable camera angle, subtitle language and dialogue language.
- Non-English onscreen indicators and menus as well as English (except the SHINCO).
- AC-DC supply adaptor can be readily plugged into a wide range of mains voltages.

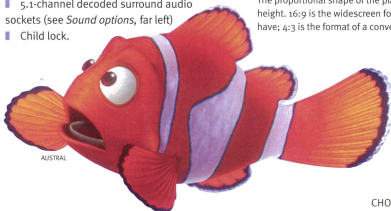
See the table for players that have the following:

- One-touch skip back to the start of the current DVD chapter or CD track.
- Slow-motion playback.
- Programmed play mode.
- S-video output for improved picture quality on an external screen.
- Carry bag.
- Audio/video cable supplied for connecting to a TV.
- Rechargeable battery pack included.

WHAT THEY DON'T HAVE

A normal DVD player would be expected to have the following, but none of the players in this test did.

- Component (Y,Cb,Cr) video output for best-quality video output.
- 5.1-channel decoded surround audio sockets (see *Sound options*, far left)
- Child lock.



AUSTRAL

Beans, please...

Be it a meal on its own or a late-night snack, baked beans are a really healthy choice — but which ones taste the best?

IN A NUTSHELL

- You don't need to pay more for good baked beans — **BI-LO Baked beans in tomato sauce** came equal second in our taste test and set us back just 35 cents a can.
- Those watching their salt intake can also take heart — our trialists liked a salt-reduced version, **SPC Salt reduced baked beans rich tomato**, better than some non salt-reduced beans.

Baked beans are a great meal or late-night snack, both on their own or with toast. They're generally made from navy beans, also known as haricot beans. The beans are cooked and served in a tomato sauce, and may have other flavours added.

There's a lot of brands in the supermarket, though, so we asked our Home Testers to find the tastiest for you. They tasted all the plain baked beans in tomato sauce we could find on the shelves.

SPC Baked beans rich tomato were the best-liked, but not far behind were **BI-LO Baked beans in tomato sauce**, which cost us just 35 cents for a 425 g can — so you needn't pay a lot of money to get a nutritious and tasty meal.

SOMETHING NICE THAT'S GOOD FOR YOU!

Baked beans are a nutritionist's dream food — they're low in fat (and, more importantly, in saturated fat), high in protein, iron, vitamins and minerals, and are an excellent source of dietary fibre. A one-cup serve of baked beans will provide around 13 g of fibre and about 780 kJ. Serve them on some wholemeal or wholegrain toast and you've got a great high-fibre, high-protein meal.

The haem they provide is non-haem iron, which isn't as readily absorbed by the body as

the haem form of iron found in meat, but if you serve them with a glass of orange juice, the vitamin C will help the iron be absorbed.

The main downside of baked beans is that a serve can be quite high in sodium — apart from the **WEIGHT WATCHERS** version, the non salt-reduced varieties tasted ranged from 660 mg per serve to 1100 mg. It's added to make the beans tastier, although the **SPC**, **BI-LO** and **CORALE** baked beans that were among the best-liked were also among the lowest for sodium content — see the table for how much each brand contains.

Adults should be aiming for no more than 2300 mg of sodium a day, and the recommended upper daily limit for children varies with age but is even less, so one serve of most baked beans will provide a considerable proportion of the daily limit for both adults and children.

The good news from this taste test is that a salt-reduced version, **SPC Salt reduced baked beans rich tomato**, rated reasonably well, while providing only around 550 mg of sodium per 220 g serve. (The recommended serve size on the can is 125 g compared to around 210–220 g for most other brands, which makes it look on the label as if it contains much less sodium.) If you're watching your salt intake, they're certainly worth a try.

And don't think you're doing your waistline any favours by choosing **WEIGHT WATCHERS Baked beans** — not only didn't they rate very well for taste, but you're not saving yourself any kilojoules or fat. Their nutrition profile is no different from the other brands we looked at, except that they're lower in sodium (comparable to the salt-reduced versions). The only difference is that they're sold in a smaller can, so you might not be tempted to eat as much (but you'll pay a lot more for the privilege).



The tasting

For the taste test we bought all the brands of baked beans we could find in the supermarket that were in a plain tomato sauce. 281 Home Testers who are regular bean eaters did the tasting — thanks to you all. Each was sent three brands of beans to be tasted over a three-day period; each brand was tasted around 55 times. The label on the can was concealed so the trialists didn't know which brand they were tasting.



SPC BAKED BEANS RICH TOMATO

"These were so nice I ate the whole can."
 "The best sauce I've tried — not just a sweet red syrup."

BI-LO BAKED BEANS IN TOMATO SAUCE

"I like the mature, smoky taste."
 "Good bean-to-sauce ratio."

WATTIES BAKED BEANS

"Great taste and flavour."
 "Would definitely buy this brand — very nice and enjoyable."

CORALE BAKED BEANS IN TOMATO SAUCE (Aldi)

"Nice to eat — no annoying aftertaste on the palate."
 "The beans were good, nice texture and plenty of them, but the sauce let it down."



STOCKFOOD

Brand and type	1 Overall score (%)	Beans as % of contents*	Sodium (mg per 220 g serve)**	Origin	Can size (g)	Price per can (\$)†
SPC Baked beans rich tomato	74	43	735	Australia	425	1.07
BI-LO Baked beans in tomato sauce	71	43	735	Australia	425	0.35
WATTIES Baked beans	71	50	1034	NZ	420	1.07
CORALE Baked beans in tomato sauce (Aldi)	67	35	880	Italy	425	0.69
COLES SAVINGS Baked beans in tomato sauce	64	42	1067	NZ	420	0.65
SPC Salt reduced baked beans rich tomato	63	43	550	Australia	425	1.07
COLES FARMLAND Baked beans in tomato sauce	61	43	735	Australia	425	0.66
HEINZ Baked beans in tomato sauce	60	52	660	NZ	420	1.25
HEINZ English recipe baked beans in tomato sauce	60	52	1034	NZ	420	1.35
HOME BRAND Baked beans in tomato sauce	59	42	1067	NZ	420	0.65
NO FRILLS Baked beans in tomato sauce	59	42	1067	NZ	420	0.48
PANTRY VALUE Baked beans in tomato sauce (Aldi)	58	49	1100	Italy	425	0.35
HEINZ Salt reduced baked beans	48	52	465	NZ	420	1.25
WEIGHT WATCHERS Baked beans in tomato sauce	48	56	484	Australia	130 (A)	2.04 (A)
HEINZ No added salt baked beans	33	52	44	NZ	420	1.25

* As stated on the can.

** We used a 220 g serve for easy comparison. Some products recommend smaller serve sizes or come in smaller cans.

† Based on the price we paid in December 2003 for 420 g or 425 g cans.

(A) This product is sold in a 130 g can only, but for easy comparison the price is based on what it would cost to buy 420 g.

1 Overall score

While we asked the tasters to separately rate factors such as taste, texture and the size and number of beans, the overall score isn't a combination of these ratings. It's an actual score given by tasters to take all these issues plus any others into account. We haven't published all the individual ratings because they closely reflect the overall score and rank order.

WATER:

Public supply or private profit?

a consumer right?

This article was written for Consumers International (CI), the global federation of 250 consumer organisations in 150 countries, by Dr Sothi Rachagan, CI's Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific. The Australian Consumers' Association (publisher of CHOICE) was a founding member of CI and supports its efforts not just for consumers in Australia but particularly in developing countries.

While water is vital for life, this basic need is denied to millions of consumers worldwide. One in six of the world's population (1.1 billion people) lacks an adequate supply of safe water. Two-fifths of the world's population (2.4 billion people) lack access to proper sanitation. Most of these people live in Africa and Asia, with 1.3 billion in China and India. In Asia, less than half the population has access to improved sanitation.

Water supply in most nations is still primarily a public service controlled by the government, including in such developed countries as the US, Japan, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands.

However, since the 1980s the public sector has been denigrated and governments have moved towards greater reliance on market forces for allocation and delivery of services. This approach has been promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) and welcomed by the transnational water corporations.

By the late 1970s when public enterprises fell into difficult times, many developing countries were having to grovel before the Bretton Woods institutions. These institutions demanded 'public sector reform' — often meaning the privatisation of state-owned companies — as a condition for getting loans.

IMF and World Bank lending policies have led to some of the poorest countries in the world, including Mozambique, Benin, Niger, Rwanda, Honduras, Yemen, Tanzania, Cameroon and Kenya, privatising their water supply. Ironically, most of these countries privatised as a condition of receiving credit from the IMF's new Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility.

WATER AS BIG BUSINESS

Privatisation has continued unabated. What these institutions have achieved is the greatest ever transfer of public wealth into private hands. The transnational corporations had found the perfect means for market access in the developing world. But there has been much opposition to water

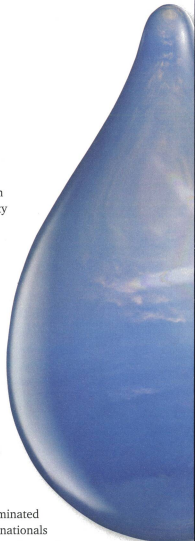
being regarded as an economic commodity to be surrendered to transnational corporations.

This is because water is big business and controlled by a few big corporations. The value of the global water and wastewater industry is estimated to be as much as US\$800 billion annually and is growing rapidly.

The world of privatised water is overwhelmingly dominated by two French multinationals — Suez (formerly Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux) and Vivendi Universal, with US\$9 billion and US\$12.2 billion of water revenue in 2001 respectively. The Global Fortune 500 ranks both among the 100 largest corporations in the world. Between them, they own or have controlling interests in water companies in over 100 countries and distribute water to more than 100 million people around the world.

Other major corporate actors include German water giant RWE and its British subsidiary Thames Water, and the US-based Bechtel. Before its collapse, Enron was also a major player. Nine of the 10 largest water corporations in the world are located in Europe, which therefore currently has a comparative advantage.

Providing sufficient water of good quality calls for new investments — for water harvesting, processing and distribution. Transnational water corporations assert that they can provide the answer. They will do so only by raising charges, and the rise in prices is often to levels that preclude access for the poor.



WATER AS A COMMODITY

Since transnational water corporations see water as a commodity, only the greater use of it will ensure profitability. Privatised companies often want control of river basins and aquifers and seek pollution abatement of these because it will reduce production costs, but they invariably show a lack of enthusiasm for any scheme that results in conservation by users. Transnational corporations seek to protect their commercial interests. They may not take a holistic view of a nation's resources and the need to conserve and manage these resources in a sustainable manner.

In most countries, water corporations source underground water for their bottled water industry without prior determination of the right to harvest from such sources and an assessment of the adverse impacts that such harvesting will have on the environment, farms and households that are also reliant on the same source for water. They seek formalisation of water rights that will enable them to acquire monopoly rights. The formalisation they promote is one that seeks to exclude communal ownership and penalise indigenous and farming communities.

DOWN THE DRAIN...

In Malaysia, the failure of the water privatisation venture between Thames Water and the Kelantan state government resulted in the payoff of US\$13.2 million to the British multinational. The Sabah state government reportedly owes three concessionaires a total of US\$137.9 million. The Selangor state government is similarly reported to be in debt to the tune of US\$218.6 million to its concessionaire. The consequence is not better service but a drained treasury. It's vital to ensure that the terms of the privatisation contract are balanced and will not pose a liability to the government or consumers.

In the Philippines, water concession by two private companies initially showed much improvement in comparison to the previous Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS). Six years later, worse problems than those existing prior to privatisation had emerged. Water losses that prompted MWSS to privatise remained high and even worsened in the western half of the city, and water prices went up. In December 2002, one of the concessionaires, Maynilad Water, announced that it was abandoning a concession serving 6.5 million people in the western part of Metro Manila. The failed privatisation has proven costly for the government: Maynilad has demanded a refund of the US\$303 million capital it had invested.

HOW MUCH DOES THE RAIN COST?

Privatisation evokes different responses in different countries and among different population segments. Much depends on the experience a country has had with public enterprises. Where the experience has been undemocratic, inefficient and inequitable state economic management, there's understandably much enthusiasm for privatisation. There's also much anticipation of the efficiency that privatisation promises among segments of the population wealthy enough to afford better goods and services.

Others are less enthusiastic or even antagonistic. They resent the transfer of public assets to private ownership and fear that the move will result in losses to both workers and consumers.

Privatisation of a nation's water supply system involves critical issues uncommon to other privatisation exercises. A decision to privatise, especially when it involves a transfer of ownership, is a momentous decision. How much does the rain cost? How much does the aquifer cost? What price the river basin? Yet many water utility privatisations are undertaken on terms that involve the permanent alienation of these to particular private interests.

Shouldn't a nation's leaders consult with its citizens before they decide to privatise national assets, and shouldn't implementation of privatisation be conducted in a transparent manner? Unfortunately, this is hardly the experience, and the terms of privatisation agreements are seldom in the public domain. Company law may require contractual terms to be revealed to shareholders, but there's apparently no such equivalent in constitutional law for citizens to obtain copies of agreements that involve the sale of assets of which they're part owners.

Also at stake are citizens' rights over water resources and catchment areas. Of special concern is the threat to water security posed by developments at the World Trade Organisation and the dominance of the transnational water corporations.

It's clear that there's grave concern not only about the manner in which privatisation is being undertaken but also about the whole concept of privatising a basic national resource. At threat is the nation's water security.

Water is an even more precious commodity than oil. In the logic of bombs, regime change and Iraq, oil played a significant part. *Fortune* (May 2000) magazine asserts, "Water promises to be to the 21st century what oil was to the 20th century." The Turks have a saying:

*"Iraq has oil, we have water.
Let them drink their oil."*

The challenge facing many developing countries, therefore, is how to supply sufficient water of good quality at a reasonable price. ■

Prepaid funeral protection

NSW consumers buying prepaid funeral packages are soon to be better informed and protected under proposals accepted by the state parliament late in 2003. The proposals include annual reporting to fund members, cooling-off periods, uncapping of the maximum amount paid out under the fund, increased powers for regulators to govern funds and better disclosure for consumers.

Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania can also expect separate reforms to relevant legislation in the future.



RETIREMENT VILLAGE UPDATE

Our article on contracts and management practices in retirement villages in the September 2003 issue of CHOICE has caught the eye of the ACCC. If you have a relevant experience you'd like to pass on, please contact the ACCC Infocentre on 1300 302 502 or lodge a complaint online at www.accc.gov.au.

Care needed investing overseas

The Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) recently warned consumers about an unsolicited investment letter from a Swiss organisation, Prime Forestry Group. The letter advertised the opportunity of a tempting 14% return on investments in sustainable forestry development.

However, Prime Forestry Group doesn't hold an Australian Financial Services (AFS) licence to offer or operate an investment scheme in Australia, so its offer breaches the Corporations Act. If you invested in this scheme, you wouldn't be covered by Australian consumer protection law. (Following ASIC's action, Prime Forestry Group has stopped offering its products in Australia.)

As a general rule, ASIC warns individual investors to take certain precautions before investing overseas:

- Invest through a business licensed in Australia that offers overseas investments, so that the investment is covered by Australian legislation.
- You could also check that the country you're investing in has similar or at least adequate legal infrastructure for investments and financial services. This may make it easier to retrieve invested funds. For more information go to the ASIC consumer website at www.fido.asic.gov.au and type 'overseas investments' in the search box. 'Which countries would you invest in?' gives information about international investing reports from the Financial Stability Forum (www.fsforum.org) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (www.oecd.org).
- Does the investment have a prospectus or product disclosure statement? Both of these should be registered with ASIC if investments are offered within Australia.

And don't forget that investments that offer high returns also mean higher risks — you don't get something for nothing. A high return is anything 1–2% per year or more above the average return for its asset class (property, local shares, international shares, etc). If it looks too good to be true, it probably is.



Online grocers

Food shopping in the fast lane.

TAMARA GRAHAM

IN A NUTSHELL

■ Online grocery shopping is convenient, but you need to pay attention to a few details to make it work well for you.

In Australia, online food and grocery stores range from very large supermarkets to small, specialist shops like organic grocers, butchers and kosher-food stockists. All offer the ease and convenience of shopping from your computer so you don't have to battle supermarket aisles or queues.

CHOICE's sister publication *Computer CHOICE* looked at the websites of five online supermarkets to get an idea of what it's like to do your grocery shopping online.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Most online grocers sell a wide variety of items ranging from perishable goods such as fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products to canned items, household cleaners and, in some cases, alcohol. You can usually search by category (fruit, vegetables, dairy, bakery, etc) or keyword (Kleenex tissues), or view all the categories or products at once.

Most sites save items to a shopping trolley, which can be viewed and modified before payment. After you've filled your trolley, you go to the 'checkout', where you'll be asked to select a preferred day and time for delivery and enter your payment details.

For payment, the facilities offered by online grocers shouldn't vary from what you'd expect for any online retailer. Make sure the site uses a secure server and that you can contact the store by phone (preferably) or email, should problems arise.

DELIVERY

For many people, one of the main advantages of online grocery shopping is having the heavy items delivered straight to your door. But it's a luxury

you'll pay for. Delivery charges vary depending on the shop, day and timeslot of delivery, but often you can choose between a two-hour (more expensive) or four-hour delivery window.

Choose your delivery time carefully — some stores require somebody to be home to accept the order. If you're not, you may be charged an additional delivery fee.

If you're likely to be ordering perishable items, some stores use refrigerated trucks at no extra charge to customers, while others charge for

polystyrene containers or coolers.

It's hard to assess the quality and freshness of online items, but most stores have some form of guarantee, so if you're not satisfied you should be able to get your money back.

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- Allow ample time for ordering on your first visit. You'll need to register, find your way around the site and sort through the items available (sometimes numbering thousands).
- Most online grocers provide a substitution service to deal with products that are out of stock. In many cases it's optional and you may even be able to choose to substitute on a per item basis. However, some automatically substitute, in most cases with either a product of the same brand but different size, or a different brand. If you're unhappy you should be able to get a refund or credit.
- Some online grocers sell items such as meat, fruit and vegetables by weight rather than unit — instead of buying four apples, you can only choose a 1 kg bag. If you're not in the habit of buying your fresh produce this way, it may take some getting used to.
- The price you pay may not be what was listed on the website at the time of ordering. For most of the stores we looked at, the terms and conditions say the price you're charged is what's scanned when your order is processed.
- Some sites have a minimum order amount — check before starting.

If you'd like to subscribe to *Computer CHOICE*, see page 49, call 1800 069 552 or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines. ■

Car repair costs

Repairing the damage from a low-speed crash can cost more than 30% of a car's purchase price. Check how your model fares.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ Low-speed crash tests are designed to indicate a car's repair costs, not safety.

■ Overall, repair bills for the 46 models assessed ranged from under \$2300 to more than \$7500.

Each year, NRMA INSURANCE picks a number of Australia's top-selling cars and crashes a pendulum device into their front right-hand corner.

This simulates a 15 km/h crash into a fixed barrier or a collision into the rear of another car at about 30 km/h — the most common type of crash in Australia. NRMA technicians then assess the resulting damage.

The insurer wants three outcomes from the test:

- To help determine the insurance premiums for the tested models.
- To encourage manufacturers to keep prices of spare parts low — they can make up more than 80% of the total repair bill.
- To reveal design weaknesses that can be rectified when a new version of the model is released.

Repair costs for models tested in previous years that are still available unchanged are updated using current labour and parts costs.

MIXED BAG

Some new models show what's possible when repair costs are considered on the drawing board. For example, the **SMART Coupé** (pictured) has by far the lowest repair bill of all the assessed models, and the new **MAZDA 2** is more than 40% cheaper to repair than the **121** it's replaced.

However, there are bad examples too. The new **MITSUBISHI Magna** and **SUBARU Liberty** and **Outback** cost significantly more to repair than their old versions. And the all-new **FORD Focus**, **HONDA Jazz** and **MITSUBISHI Outlander** have among the highest repair bills in their respective categories.



Make / model (ranked by total repair costs within groups)

	Total repair costs (\$)*	Labour (\$)*	Parts (\$)*	Total as % of purchase price	Purchase price (\$)*	1 Change compared to 2002
SMALL						
SMART Fourtwo Coupé, 0.7 L, 2-door, automatic, coupé	2258	554	1705	9.9	22,900	Not tested in 2002
HYUNDAI Accent, 1.6 L, 3-door, manual, hatch	2972	1335	1637	19.8	14,990	✓
HYUNDAI Getz, 1.5 L, 3-door, manual, hatch	3032	1170	1862	21.7	13,990	Not tested in 2002
MAZDA 2 Neo, 1.5 L, 5-door, automatic, hatch	3120	841	2279	15.4	20,210	✓✓✓ (A)
DAEWOO Kalos, 1.5 L, 5-door, manual, hatch	3342	1057	2285	22.3	14,990	✓✓ (B)
HOLDEN Barina SXi, 1.4 L, 3-door, manual, hatch	3390	709	2681	18.0	18,870	✗
DAEWOO Matiz, 0.8 L, 5-door, manual, hatch	3617	1607	2009	27.3	13,240	✓
KIA Rio, 1.5 L, 5-door, manual, hatch	4322	1838	2484	28.8	14,990	✓
DAIHATSU Sirion, 1.0 L, 5-door, manual, hatch	4353	1511	2842	29.5	14,780	✓
TOYOTA Echo, 1.3 L, 3-door, manual, hatch	4594	1872	2722	31.7	14,490	✗✗
MITSUBISHI Mirage, 1.5 L, 3-door, manual, hatch	4902	1680	3222	27.7	17,690	✓
HONDA Jazz Vti, 1.5 L, 5-door, automatic, hatch	5629	1842	3787	25.3	22,290	Not tested in 2002
FORD Ka2, 1.3 L, 3-door, manual, hatch	5953	1862	4092	37.2	15,990	✗

SMALL TO MEDIUM

SUBARU Impreza RS, 2.5 L, 4-door, manual, sedan	3721	1393	2326	11.3	32,990	✗
SUBARU Impreza WRX, 2.0 L turbo, 5-door, manual, hatch	3887	1406	2481	9.1	42,940	✓
PEUGEOT 207 XSE, 2.0 L, 5-door, automatic, hatch	4049	676	3373	11.9	33,990	✓
HYUNDAI Elantra HVT GL, 2.0 L, 5-door, automatic, hatch	4168	1900	2268	19.9	20,980	✓
TOYOTA Corolla Seta Ascent, 1.8 L, 5-door, manual, hatch	4687	1509	3178	21.7	21,630	✓
HOLDEN Astra City, 1.8 L, 5-door, automatic, hatch	4913	1327	3586	19.8	24,870	✗
FORD Focus CL, 2.0 L, 5-door, automatic, hatch	5277	1131	4146	23.3	22,660	Not tested in 2002
MAZDA 323 Astina, 1.8 L, 5-door, manual, hatch	6088	1787	4300	30.5	19,990	✗
NISSAN Pulsar ST, 1.6 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	6268	2199	4070	28.5	21,990	✓
HONDA Civic Vi, 1.7 L, 5-door, automatic, hatch	6286	2052	4234	22.5	27,950	✗

MEDIUM

MAZDA 6 Classic, 2.3 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	3044	832	2212	9.0	33,785	✗
TOYOTA Camry Altise, 2.4 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	3888	1578	2310	13.6	28,490	✗
HOLDEN Vectra GL, 2.2 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	4181	1002	3179	11.3	36,990	✓✓
SUBARU Liberty 2.5i Safety, 2.5 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	4291	1410	2881	10.6	40,490	✗✗

LARGE

FORD Falcon XT, 4.0 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	3179	1089	2090	9.2	34,660	✗
HOLDEN Commodore Executive, 3.8 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	3239	1609	1630	9.3	34,690	✓
MITSUBISHI Magna ES, 3.5 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	3464	1714	1750	10.0	34,610	✗✗
TOYOTA Avalon GXi, 3.0 L, 4-door, automatic, sedan	4360	1917	2444	14.1	30,990	✗

RECREATIONAL 4WDs

SUBARU Forester XS, 2.5 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	3557	1389	2168	9.7	36,590	✓
SUZUKI Grand Vitara Sports, 2.5 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	3912	2011	1901	11.9	32,890	✓
SUBARU Outback 2.5i, 2.5 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	4443	1488	2955	10.9	40,680	✗✗
KIA Sportage, 2.0 L, 4-door, manual, wagon	4805	1694	3110	19.2	24,990	✓
DAIHATSU Terios DX, 1.3 L, 4-door, manual, wagon	5145	1619	3526	27.1	18,950	✗
NISSAN X-Trail ST, 2.5 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	6032	2073	3959	17.7	33,990	✓
TOYOTA RAV4 Edge, 2.0 L, 4-door, manual, wagon	6977	1362	5615	21.7	32,145	✓
MITSUBISHI Outlander XLS, 2.4 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	7417	1980	5437	19.8	37,490	Not tested in 2002
HONDA CR-V Sports, 2.4 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	7582	1395	6187	19.7	38,490	✗

PEOPLE MOVER

DAEWOO Tacuma, 2.0 L, 5-door, automatic, wagon	2814	947	1867	10.4	26,990	✓
KIA Carnival LS, 2.5 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	4447	1718	2729	13.7	32,490	✓
HOLDEN Zafira, 2.2 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	4769	1220	3549	13.7	34,690	✓
TOYOTA Avensis Verso GLX, 2.4 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	5293	1766	3527	12.3	43,100	✓
HYUNDAI Trajet GLS, 2.7 L, 4-door, automatic, wagon	7170	2226	4944	19.3	37,163	✓
RENAULT Scenic Expression, 2.0 L, 5-door, automatic, wagon	7218	1969	5249	23.3	30,990	✓

1 Change compared to 2002

This shows how repair costs for each model have changed since the 2002 test.

- ✓✓✓ Increased by more than 20%
- ✓✓ Increased by 10–20%
- ✓ Unchanged or decreased by less than 10%
- ✗ Decreased by 10–20%
- ✗✗✗ Decreased by more than 20%

* Prices as at October 31, 2003

(including 10% GST and rounded to the nearest dollar), as quoted by manufacturers or distributors. All new-car prices include air conditioning and power steering where available. Air conditioning is regarded as standard equipment on some vehicles that have had extended marketing deals.

(A) Compared to Mazda 121 Miato.

(B) Compared to Daewoo Lanos.

Source: NRMA Insurance, 2003.





PHOTO: JAMBA/GETTY IMAGES

TODDLER TAMERS

They're designed to prevent access to danger — but could they be a danger in themselves?

some safety issues. We tested according to the British standard for safety gates and barriers, as there's no Australian standard. The main hazards we found are:

■ **Entrapments:** If toddlers' fingers get trapped in holes or limbs get stuck between bars, this can be quite distressing and may bruise, although it's unlikely to be life-threatening. Some gates have gaps which, according to the standard, may even allow a baby to get its torso stuck or, potentially more dangerous (especially at the top of stairs), pass through, leaving their head trapped. However, the standard covers all babies and children from birth to 24 months, and the average crawler or toddler is likely to be too large to squeeze through such gaps.

■ **Snagging or protruding parts:** Clothing could get caught on them, possibly even strangling the child.

■ **Footholds** that allow a child to climb the gate. The table (page 38) shows which models failed which tests. Only one model, the **BABYDAN**, passed all the safety tests. However, the **VALCO** passed most tests — it only failed the limb entrapment test, which isn't a life-threatening hazard — and is worth considering.

If this is any indication of the general picture for all gates on the market, you may be wondering whether you'd be better off not having a gate at all — especially if you already own one that failed the safety tests. But the benefits of having a safety gate will almost always outweigh the risks.

According to various state and national injury surveillance offices, there've been no hospitalisations or deaths on their records due to

IN A NUTSHELL

■ **On test:** Seven walk-through gates and two step-over barriers.

■ **Only one of the nine products** passed all the sections of the British standard we tested them to — yet five claimed to meet it.

■ **The main concerns** were entrapment hazards, potential strangulation risks and footholds.

Every year thousands of toddlers suffer from preventable accidents in the home. There are various child safety products available — childproof cupboard locks, stove guards, tap guards, doorknob covers and so on — but for many homes, the easiest solution may be a childproof gate or barrier to keep the youngsters out of dangerous rooms like the kitchen or bathroom, and off the stairs.

We tested two basic types: a gate that swings open and closed, so adults can walk through, and a fixed barrier adults have to step over.

SAFETY

It may or may not surprise you to learn that, like many other baby products we test, most safety gates have

WHAT TO BUY

BABYDAN Premier Pressure Gate CC7500	\$100
WORTH CONSIDERING	
VALCO Swing Back Gate SG-03A	\$100

entrapment or strangulation accidents caused by safety gates. Yet every year there are hundreds of infant and toddler hospitalisations that might have been prevented with the proper use of a safety gate.

EASE OF USE

■ Installation

The two wooden barriers (**KIDDY COTS** and **TODDLER SECURITY**) were rated as very easy to fit and took less than a minute (see the photos, below right).

Like the barriers, the gates are held in place by compression — see the photos, page 39. Adjusting the top spindles that hold the gate to the wall also affects the distance between the moving gate and its frame, which in turn affects the fit of the latch: if it's too big or too small a gap, the latch won't operate. The **DREAM BABY** is difficult to set correctly (the tolerances for the distances are very small), so it was rated as difficult to install.

All the other gates took less than 10 minutes to set up the first time they were used, including screwing wall cups to the doorway, and less than three minutes for successive fittings (when the cups were already fitted). They were rated easy (no tools required once the cups are fitted) or OK (requires a spanner to adjust spindles) to install.

■ Opening and closing

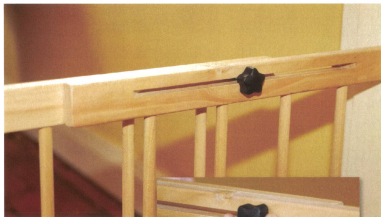
The Victorian Injury Surveillance System has reports of several adults going to hospital for treatment after injuring themselves stepping over a barrier. It also reported on a baby taken to hospital after being lifted over a gate by his hands (dislocated elbow — ouch!). Having a walk-through gate that's easy to open may help reduce both risks.

THE FIRST YEARS has a foot-operated release pedal: you simply tread on it and push with your knee (see the photo, page 38). This is a great idea because it can still be opened when your hands are full of baby, dinner, washing, etc. While it doesn't close automatically, it will self-latch if pushed shut with your foot. The **BETACARE** was also rated very easy to operate: to open it you simply lift the gate, and when released it swings back and self-latches.

The other five models can be opened one-handed, but some are easier than others — the **SAFETY 1st** was the hardest. They all have the opening mechanism at the top, operated by either sliding or pressing a safety latch, then lifting the handle and/or the gate itself. Of these, the **DREAM BABY** was rated as difficult because it would often not self-latch and it would be very easy to assume it was closed when it wasn't. There were no difficulties with the others of this type.

What to look for

- For most people, gates that swing open are probably more practical than barriers you have to step over — and probably safer (see *Opening and closing*, below left).
- Look for a model that can be opened by a foot pedal or at least is easy to open with one hand.
- Latches should either require a reasonable force to operate them or at least two separate actions.
- There should be no crossbars or mesh that provide footholds, and no sharp edges or protrusions.
- Check that the size of the opening to be gated is within the recommended dimensions for your preferred model — many have extensions you can use for larger openings.
- Models you can adjust without the need for a spanner are more convenient, and are safe as long as the nuts are done up tight.



To fit the barriers, you simply slide them open to suit the width of the opening and fix the width by tightening the knobs. By exerting outward pressure against the wall or doorway, the barrier is held in place by compression. Additional pressure can be applied by turning wing nuts on one side of the barrier.



TEST: Safety gates & barriers

		1 SAFETY TESTS					2 EASE OF USE			SPECIFICATIONS		
Brand / model (in alphabetical order within groups)	Type	Entrapments	Snagging and protruding parts		Footholds	Detachable small parts	Security of fit	Ease of installation	Ease of opening / closing	Self-closing	Construction material	Height
RECOMMENDED												
BABYDAN Premier Pressure Gate CC7500	Gate (A)						Good	OK	Easy		Metal	75
WORTH CONSIDERING												
VALCO Swing Back Gate SG-03A	Gate (B)	L					Good	Easy	Easy	✓ (E)	Metal	76
NOT RECOMMENDED												
BABY TIME 310 Protecta Safety Gate	Gate (B)	T, L, F	X			X	Good	Easy	OK		Metal	78
BETACARE Auto-Close Gate	Gate (B)	L	X			X	Good	Easy	Very easy	✓	Metal	76
DREAM BABY Swing Closed Gate F160	Gate (A)	L					Good	Difficult	Difficult	✓ (F)	Metal	73
KIDDY COTS Door Barrier DG1	Barrier	T, F (C)	X		(D)		Less secure	Very easy	na	na	Wood	61
SAFETY 1ST Pressure Fit Gate 41815A	Gate (A)	F	X				Good	OK	OK		Metal	77
THE FIRST YEARS Hands Free Gate 3600	Gate (A)	T, L	X		X		Less secure	OK	Very easy		Metal	79
TODDLER SECURITY Standard Gate 880749	Barrier	T, F (C)	X		(D)		Less secure	Very easy	na	na	Wood	61

PROFILES

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled. Prices are what we paid in October 2003.

BABYDAN PREMIER PRESSURE GATE CC7500

Price: \$100

GOOD POINTS

- Passed all the safety tests we performed.
- Easy to open and close.

BAD POINTS

- None noted.



VALCO SWING BACK GATE SG-03A

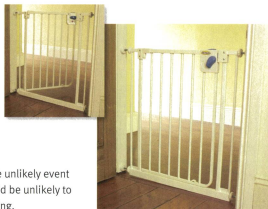
Price: \$100

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to install.
- Easy to open and close.
- The latching mechanism of the two-stage lock occurs automatically upon closing (but the more secure locking mechanism needs to be activated manually).

BAD POINTS

- Failed the limb entrapment test — in the unlikely event that an arm or leg got caught in the gate, it'd be unlikely to cause serious injury, but might be distressing.



WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- Like the **VALCO**, the **DREAM BABY** only failed the limb entrapment test. However, there were problems with installing and opening and closing it, so we haven't included it in the 'worth considering' category.
- All the other models failed more than one safety test.

* Prices are what we paid in October 2003.

na Not applicable — barriers aren't opened and closed.

ns Not stated.

(A) Opens in both directions.

(B) Opens in one direction only.

(C) Can also pose a limb entrapment risk, depending on the adjustment width.

(D) No footholds, but the height of the barriers doesn't meet the minimum height requirements of the standard.

(E) Latches but doesn't reset the locking lever.

(F) The sample tested was very difficult to adjust so that it closed automatically.

(G) Extensions supplied with the gate; others will be at extra cost. Maximum width shown is with the extension.

(H) Replacement of defective goods.

(I) "Guaranteed; return with proof of purchase if not completely satisfied."

(K) "Life of product" — which essentially means it's guaranteed to last as long as it lasts.

(L) Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind.



To open *The First Years* gate you simply tread on the release pedal and push the gate with your knee — great when both hands are full.

Depth of opening (mm)	Width extensions available	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price (\$)*
-93	✓ (G)	1	Denmark	C O White	100
-97	✓ (G)	ns	China	Valiant Enterprises	100
-86	✓	ns	China	Infia Products	76
-82	✓	ns	China	EIC	109
-80	✓ (H)		China	Tee-Zed Products	90
-91	✓	1	Australia	Kiddy Cots	28
-94	✓ (G)	(J)	China	Funtastic	90
-85	✓		ns	Funtastic	109
-92		(K)	Australia	RVIB (L)	30

1 Safety tests

■ Entrapment hazards:

T = Torso

L = Limb

F = Finger

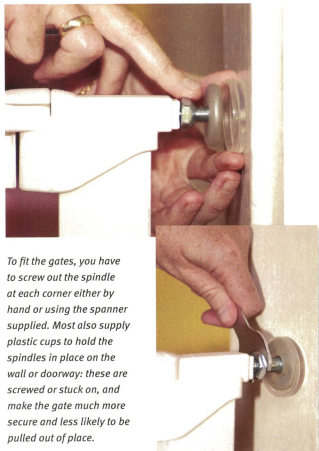
The dangers of entrapment hazards, protruding parts and footholds are discussed in the main article, page 36.

■ Detachable small parts are a choking risk.

■ While none of the gates failed the standard for security of fit, some were less secure than others.

2 Ease of use

See the main article, page 37.



To fit the gates, you have to screw out the spindle at each corner either by hand or using the spanner supplied. Most also supply plastic cups to hold the spindles in place on the wall or doorway: these are screwed or stuck on, and make the gate much more secure and less likely to be pulled out of place.

Safe use

■ Some manufacturers say gates and barriers should never be used at the top of stairs. However, most advise that when used on stairs they should be at the very top to prevent a child from falling down, and/or at the very bottom or on the first stair from the bottom to prevent a child from climbing up.

■ Where a gate will only open in one direction it should be positioned so that it opens inwards (towards where the toddler will be).

■ If there are any knobs or other protrusions that may snag clothing, install them on the outside (away from the toddler) if you can.

■ Always fit wall cups provided, particularly at the top or bottom of stairs, or on any external doorway — they make the gates much more secure.

■ Where possible, fit the gate into the door rebate (although this may mean not being able to close the door).

■ One of the biggest problems with these products is gaps between the bars. Without the benefit of measuring devices like those we use to determine whether products meet the standard, it's not easy to tell if there are potential finger or limb entrapments.

Undoubtedly the most serious risk is head entrapment, and if the baby can squeeze its body through the bars and leave their head on the other side, it amounts to the same thing.

Whether your baby can squeeze through what look like pretty small gaps depends on their size and mobility (a one-month-old may be small enough but not mobile enough to do so, for example); opportunity (will the baby be unsupervised long enough?); motivation; and determination.

Convenient CHAT

Digital technology is bringing call security, good sound quality and more and more features to cordless phones.

IN A NUTSHELL

- We tested eight digital and four analogue models. All of them are worth considering if they have the features you want.
- Digital models offer security from eavesdropping, and usually better sound quality and more features than analogue ones.

We like mobility when it comes to making phone calls, not only when we're out and about, but also at home. In the year to July 2003, cordless phones outsold corded ones by about 5:1.

And the flexibility of being able to take the phone to your favourite lounge chair, upstairs, or into the backyard while on a call is becoming more and more affordable. The 12 models in our test cost between \$60 and \$199.

Long gone are the times when cordless meant holding a brick to your ear. Digital technology in particular allows for small, lightweight, sexy handsets. They not only look more and more like mobile phones, they also have more and more of the features and functions we've become used to on mobiles: LCD displays, caller ID and multiple ring tones are already here; landline SMS may come to Australia as early as 2005.

Also, many cordless phone base stations support several handsets. You can transfer calls from one handset to another, and with some models use the handsets as an intercom — so you can make free handset-to-handset calls without using the base station.

ANALOGUE VS DIGITAL

Analogue phones are on their way out, mainly because their sound quality usually isn't as good as that of digital ones, they generally don't have as many features and functions, and they theoretically allow a neighbour with a suitable scanner to eavesdrop on your conversations.

Digital phones encrypt your conversations, so eavesdropping isn't an issue. There are currently two systems: digital enhanced cordless telecommunications (DECT) and digital spread spectrum (DSS).

DSS is claimed to have longer range and better sound quality than DECT, but our tests suggest you may often not be able to tell the difference, especially for sound quality. The only significant and consistent advantage we found was the much longer outdoor range of DSS compared to DECT models — so if your backyard is several hundred metres long, a DSS model may be for you.

Profiles

The models in the *What to buy* list are pictured in rank order — their scores, talk/standby/recharge times and features are all shown in the table, page 42. Prices shown are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in March 2004.

However, all the tested models are good phones, so the others are also worth a look if they have the features you want, and you can get them for a good price (see the table for details).

ORICOM P100

Price: \$80 **BEST BUY** (digital)

Excellent battery life and a good all-round performer, but not quite as easy to use as most others.



UNIDEN DSS2415

Price: \$179

Very good all-round performer with plenty of features, but relatively long recharge time.



WHAT TO BUY

UNIDEN DSS2415 (DSS)	\$179
TELSTRA Freedom 1100 (analogue) BEST BUY	\$60
OREGON SCIENTIFIC TD339 (DECT)	\$139
ORICOM P100 (DECT) BEST BUY	\$80
AUDIOLINE CP702SV (DECT)	\$99
GE AU27855GE3 (DECT)	\$100
PANASONIC KC-TXD410AL (DECT)	\$139

AUDIOLINE CP702SV

Price: \$99

A solid all-round performer without major weaknesses.

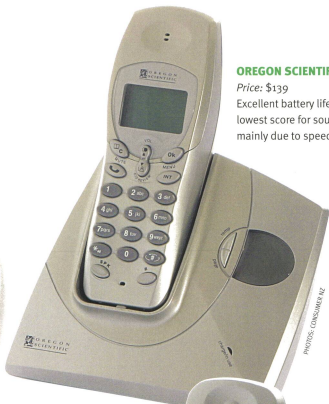




TELSTRA FREEDOM 1100

Price: \$60 **BEST BUY** (analogue)

Great value for money and the best range, but the analogue technology means conversations may not be secure.



OREGON SCIENTIFIC TD339

Price: \$139

Excellent battery life, but the lowest score for sound quality, mainly due to speech clarity.



GE AU27855GE3

Price: \$100

Excellent battery life but the sound quality is affected by line and background noise.



PANASONIC KX-TCD410AL

Price: \$139

The best sound quality but not quite as easy to use as most others.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The indoor range for the CRYSTELLE CR315, PANASONIC KX-TC2000AL and UNIDEN XS915 isn't as good as for the other models, and the CRYSTELLE and UNIDEN also have by far the shortest outdoor range.

The PANASONIC KX-TG2501AL and UNIDEN DSS2115 have a much shorter talk time than the other models. In addition, this UNIDEN has by far the shortest standby time.

PERFORMANCE

Brand / model (in rank order)	1 Overall score (%)	2 Sound quality score (%)	3 Range score (%)	4 Battery life score (%)	5 Ease of use score (%)	6 Talk time (hours)	7 Standby time (days)	8 Recharge time (hours)	9 Range outside / inside house (m)	10
UNIDEN D5S2415	84	83	89	84	79	10.0	14+	10.0	550 / 100	73
TELSTRA Freedom 1100	82	77	95	77	78	14.5	8.0	9.5	800 / 100	67
OREGON SCIENTIFIC TD339	81	72	84	100	77	15+	14+	4.5	350 / 100	78
ORICOM P100 (A)	81	80	83	100	71	15+	14+	9.0	300 / 100	64
AUDIOLINE CP702SV	80	81	83	85	74	10.5	14+	8.0	300 / 100	67
GE AU27855GE3 (B)	80	73	83	100	76	15+	14+	9.5	300 / 100	66
PANASONIC KX-TC410AL	79	87	83	74	70	13.5	8.0	4.0	300 / 100	75
CRYSTELLE CR315 (C)	78	78	71	100	74	15+	14+	7.5	130 / 90	79
UNIDEN XS915	77	80	67	100	74	15+	14+	8.0	130 / 85	79
PANASONIC KX-TG2501AL	75	73	90	42	79	4.0	8.0	4.0	600 / 100	72
UNIDEN D5S2115 (C)	75	78	88	31	79	5.5	3.5	12.5	500 / 100	79
PANASONIC KX-TC2000AL	73	78	60	79	77	8.5	14+	7.0	300 / 70	80

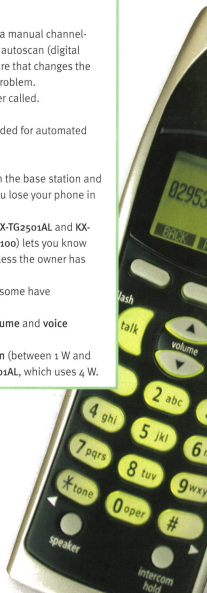
What to look for

Before buying a cordless phone, work out your needs. Check the table for which model has which feature.

- A phone that has a **dial pad and speaker on the base** allows you to make calls from the base when the handset is out in the garden. This type of phone usually acts as an intercom as well. None of the tested phones has this feature.
- Get a phone with **secure voice transmission** (DECT or DSS) if you regularly use your phone to make credit card transactions.
- Before buying, check the **ringer equivalence number** (REN) you're already using. Anything you connect to your phone line (such as phone, fax, answering machine) draws from the line's capacity. The amount drawn is the REN, which is usually printed on the bottom of the appliance. Generally, phone lines have a maximum REN capacity of 3. If the sum of the RENs of all the appliances connected to your line exceeds this, they may not work properly — for example, your phone may not ring. You may have to shop for a low-REN cordless phone to stay under your limit.
- Most cordless phone bases rely on **mains power**. You need an additional ordinary phone in case of power failure.
- If you want to talk to other people on your property or switch calls between handsets, a phone that supports **multiple handsets** could be useful.
- If applicable, check for compatibility with **hearing aids**.
- Consider whether you want to have an **answering machine** in the same unit. None of the tested models has one.
- Look for clearly labelled, large **keys with backlighting** if you'll need to use the phone in poor light (as in the photo, right).
- Try the handset to ensure it's not too small or too heavy, is **comfortable** to hold and fits well to your face.

Features (almost) all the tested models have

- One-year warranty.
- Ten or more **channels**, and either a manual channel-change button (analogue models) or autoscan (digital models), which is an automatic feature that changes the channel whenever interference is a problem.
- **Redial** function for the last number called.
- **Call waiting** compatible.
- A **# (hash) key**, which may be needed for automated telephone services.
- **Low-battery warning**.
- A **pager** feature: press a button on the base station and the handset beeps — useful when you lose your phone in the garden or round the house.
- **Caller ID** (except the PANASONIC KX-TG2501AL and KX-TC2000AL and the TELSTRA Freedom 1100) lets you know the number a call is coming from, unless the owner has requested anonymity.
- At least 10 **speed-dial** memories (some have considerably more).
- At least two settings for **ringer volume** and **voice volume** control.
- Good **standby power consumption** (between 1 W and 2 W), except the PANASONIC KX-TG2501AL, which uses 4 W.



FEATURES							SPECIFICATIONS					
Un-tunable	Mute button	Backlit keypad	Out-of-range warning	Hearing aid compatible	No. of ring tones	Handsets supported	12 System	13 REN	14 Battery type	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price (\$)*
	✓	✓	✓	✓	16	8	DSS	1.0	NiMH	China	Uniden	179
	✓			✓	3	3	Analogue	1.0	NiMH	China	Tech Pacific	60
	✓		✓		5	5	DECT	1.0	NiMH	China	Oregon Scientific	139
	✓		✓		5	1 (A)	DECT	0.5	NiMH	China	Oricom International	80
	✓		✓		5	5	DECT	0.5	NiMH	China	Doro	99
	✓				1	1 (B)	DECT	1.0	NiMH	China	Thomson Telecom	100
			✓		20	6	DECT	0.5	NiMH	Thailand	Panasonic	139
				✓	2	1	Analogue	1.0	NiCad	China	Uniden	69
				✓	2	1	Analogue	1.0	NiCad	China	Uniden	89
		✓	✓		1	1	DSS	0.5	NiCad	Malaysia	Panasonic	199
		✓	✓	✓	2	7	DSS	1.0	NiMH	China	Uniden	169
		✓			1	1	Analogue	0.5	NiCad	Thailand	Panasonic	89

* Price are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in March 2004.

- (A) This model is also available in a twin pack with two handsets (P700+1) for \$129. According to the distributor, it's also technically identical to the P700 (\$80), which has cosmetic differences only and is also available in a twin pack (P90+1, \$129).
- (B) This model is also available as a twin pack with two handsets (AU27856GE3, \$149).
- (C) The manufacturer says this model is being discontinued and can only be found at a few retailers.

1 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of 70% for performance (sound quality 28%, range 28% and battery life 14%) and 30% for ease of use.

2 Sound quality score

We assessed speech clarity, speech loudness, line noise and background noise reduction.

3 Range score

We measured the range in which you can use the phone outside and inside a house (see note 9 for details).

4 Battery life score

We measured the phones' maximum talk and standby times (see notes 6 and 7 for details).

5 Ease of use score

A panel of three people assessed the following (all weighted equally):

- Clarity and completeness of the instruction manual.
- Layout of keys and controls.
- Readability of the numbers and labels.
- Feel and comfort of the handset.
- Ease of cleaning the phone.
- Use of special features.

6 Talk time

The number of hours the phone lasted in talk mode, rounded to the nearest half-hour. We stopped the test after 15 hours.

7 Standby time

The number of days the phone lasted in standby mode, rounded to the nearest half day. We stopped the test after a fortnight.

8 Recharge time

The time taken to recharge rounded to the nearest half-hour.

9 Range outside / inside a house

Outside: The base station was set up with a direct line of sight to the handset. We measured the distance (rounded to the nearest 10 m) at which voice transmission became unintelligible or dropped out.

Inside: The range inside a house was measured to a maximum of 100 m (rounded to the nearest 5 m) to check the impact of obstructions.

Results are only comparative and may differ from manufacturer claims, as different wall and ceiling constructions and different atmospheric conditions will affect the range.

10 Ring loudness

Measured at 1 m from the handset (set to maximum) while it wasn't on the base.

11 Features

See *What to look for*, far left, for explanations of some of these.

12 System

Analogue phones are becoming less and less popular. Their main drawback is that conversations aren't secure, so theoretically a third party can listen in on your calls.

Both DECT and DSS are digital systems that securely encrypt your conversations. Manufacturers claim that DSS offers longer range (which our outdoor test confirmed) and better voice quality (which our test didn't confirm across the board) than DECT. (See *Analogue vs digital*, page 40, for more.)

13 REN: ringer equivalence number

Generally, phone lines have a maximum REN capacity of 3 – see *What to look for* for more.

14 Battery type

Unlike nickel cadmium (NiCad) batteries, nickel metal hydride (NiMH) cells don't contain cadmium (which is toxic), making them safer for disposal in landfills.

TELSTRA F2200

We also tested the **TELSTRA F2200**.

However, the distributor (Tech Pacific) says the model has been upgraded since we bought our test sample, and the changes (to talk time and features) would affect our scores. So we can't publish full results for this model, but its overall score with the shorter tested talk time was 77%.

Backlit keys make a phone easier to use in poor light.



Drying times ...

Clothes dryers dry clothes — but some get it done much faster than others.

IN A NUTSHELL

- All the dryers work well, but handy features and thoughtful design set some apart.
- There's a big difference in drying time — a full load can take nearly an hour longer to dry between the fastest and slowest 5 kg models, for example.

All the dryers reported on are able to dry clothes well and none is particularly difficult to use. But if you're waiting for your jeans to dry, you could be at that restaurant a lot earlier with some models.

Of the models that hold 5 kg of clothes, for example, the time to dry a full load ranges from one hour and 48 minutes (the **WHIRLPOOL**) to two hours and 42 minutes (the **HOOVER 5040ED**).

Most of the 3.5 kg dryers in the test have shorter drying times per load and can also be cheaper to buy and run — as long as you don't need to run extra loads to get all your washing dry. They could be fine for singles and couples. However, if laundry space is your problem, they don't take up much less room than the higher-capacity models (see the table, page 47).

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

If you're concerned about the environment, no clothes dryer — except some of the very expensive, top-end condenser models (think well over \$1000) — is particularly energy-efficient. Otherwise, two energy rating stars is about the best you can hope for. But there are times and situations when owning a dryer is essential — and plenty of days when you'll be glad you've got one.

Some things, such as handy features and thoughtful design, do set some dryers apart. For example, a filter that's easy to reach and clean (which generally means it's in the door, not at the back of the drum) and the ability to duct the hot, moist air outside are two features we think many people would find useful. But the presence of a cold-only setting and a rack for drying shoes or delicates, for example, will also be on some people's wish list. For more on features, see *What to look for*, above right.

NO MORE GUESSWORK

The test includes a range of dryers costing up to \$1000, most of them simple timer models plus some more sophisticated auto-sensor models (designed to dry clothes to an appropriate level on an automatic program — you don't need to set a timer and check). Which type will suit you depends on your preferences, but the good news is that all the sensor models did what they claim.

In previous tests some didn't get the level of dryness right. Now it seems manufacturers have fixed the problems and you can buy a dryer that works out how long to operate without you having to guess — and gives a good result. Some sensor models also have a timer, so you can choose which to use.

What to look for

Except where noted below, the table on page 46 tells you which models have these features.

Timer: This lets you set the length of time you want the dryer to run. A rotary dial often has more flexibility than pushbutton controls with fixed time increments.

Automatic dryness sensor: On auto-sensing dryers, the dryer automatically switches off when a sensor detects the load has reached a preset dryness level. Some auto-sensing dryers have a manual timer as well.

Wall mountable/stackable: It saves space if a dryer can be mounted on the wall or stacked on top of a front-loading washing machine. All the wall-mountable models in this test can be mounted upside-down so you can easily reach the controls. With the exception of the KLEENMAID, they come with the necessary mounting brackets.

Reverse tumbling: The drum reverses the direction of rotation at regular intervals to minimise tangling while evenly drying your clothes.

Drying rack: An external rack in front of the dryer lets you dry extra items using the warm exhaust air (this isn't possible with ducted models — see above right). An internal rack can be mounted inside some models and is useful for items that are best dried without tumbling (like shoes and hats). See the photo, right.

Selectable temperature settings: These allow you to choose hot, warm or no heat when drying your clothes (a cold setting is useful for fluffing towels or drying delicates). Dryers can have all three settings or only one or two. Some auto-sensing dryers don't have manual temperature selection at all.

A drying rack can be useful for items that don't want tumbling — see above.

Ducting: A duct can be connected to the back of some models to take hot, moist air out of your laundry — particularly useful if it's small or poorly ventilated. Generally machines that vent the exhaust air at the front can't be ducted.

Overheat protection: When the temperature of the dryer goes over the preset limit, this cuts off the power and reduces the risk of fire caused by overheating. It's a good safety feature, but if it's not resettable you'll need a service call if it trips.

Key lock/child lock: This prevents the dryer from being accidentally switched off, or the selections being altered while the dryer is running. The FISHER & PAYKEL ED56 and WESTINGHOUSE LD504A and LD505A have one.

Crease protection: All dryers have a 'cool down' period at the end of the drying cycle, but some also let you choose a special 'no heat' cycle after drying that continues until you're ready to unload the dryer. This reduces wrinkling. You'll find this feature on the ARISTON A33V, FISHER & PAYKEL ED56, KLEENMAID KED 300, WESTINGHOUSE LD505A and HOOVER 5050EDD.



WHAT TO BUY

All the machines do an acceptable job of drying clothes, and you can get 4.5–5 kg models for less than \$500.

If drying time's your main concern there's no beating the WHIRLPOOL AWZ220 timer model (\$1039), and it's also our overall top performer.

A cheaper option if you don't need a large dryer is to choose a 3.5 kg model — the FISHER & PAYKEL AD39 timer model (\$319) is the cheapest, fastest and best-performing.

If that's not big enough for your wash loads, the following 4.5 or 5 kg dryers are in the top half of our performance table and also qualify as Best Buys by being among the cheapest to buy and run:

FISHER & PAYKEL ED56 (sensor) **BEST BUY** \$449
 HOOVER 5030DD (timer) **BEST BUY** \$429
 WESTINGHOUSE LD503A (timer) **BEST BUY** \$449
 FISHER & PAYKEL AD55 (timer) **BEST BUY** \$399



Whirlpool AWZ220



Fisher & Paykel AD39
BEST BUY



Fisher & Paykel ED56
BEST BUY



Hoover 5030DD
BEST BUY



Westinghouse LD503A
BEST BUY



Fisher & Paykel AD55
BEST BUY

PERFORMANCE

7 FEATURES

Brand / model (in rank order)

	1 Overall score (%)	2 Ease of use score (%)	3 Drying performance score (%)	4 Drying time score (%)	4 Cycle time (minutes)*	5 Energy rating stars	6 Noise (dB)	Controls	Wall-mountable / stackable	Ru...
WHIRLPOOL AWZ220	68	85	55	72	108	1.5	60	Timer	- / ✓	✓
KLEENMAID KED 300	65	83	54	68	126	1.5	58	Timer	(B) / ns	✓
ARISTON A33V	63	73	53	69	120	1.5	60	Timer	ns / ✓	ns
FISHER & PAYKEL ED56	63	83	57	59	147	2.0	58	Sensor (A)	(C) / ns	✓
HOOVER 5030DD	62	82	51	62	150	1.0	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
WESTINGHOUSE LD503A	62	82	51	62	150	1.0	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
WESTINGHOUSE LD504A	62	82	53	62	150	1.5	nt	Sensor & timer	(C) / ✓	✓
WESTINGHOUSE LD505A	62	82	54	61	155	1.5	55	Sensor & timer	(C) / ✓	✓
FISHER & PAYKEL AD39	61	82	53	59	117	1.5	nt	Timer	(C) / ns	✓
FISHER & PAYKEL AD55	61	85	51	58	152	1.0	57	Timer	(C) / ns	✓
[SIMPSON Autosensing Sirocco 395550K	61	73	55	62	150	1.5	59	Sensor only	(C) / ✓	✓
[SIMPSON Autosensing Sirocco 395555K	61	73	55	62	150	1.5	nt	Sensor only	(C) / ✓	✓
HOOVER 5050EDD	60	73	54	60	160	1.5	nt	Sensor & timer	(C) / ns	✓
HOOVER 5040ED	59	73	52	60	162	1.5	55	Sensor & timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[SIMPSON Sirocco 3955500K	59	73	51	60	160	1.5	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[SIMPSON Sirocco 3955500KV	59	73	51	60	160	1.5	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[WESTINGHOUSE LD352A	59	82	48	59	116	1.0	nt	Timer	(C) / ns	✓
[WESTINGHOUSE LD353A	59	82	48	59	116	1.0	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[SIMPSON Sirocco 39P450K	58	72	51	59	150	1.0	59	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[SIMPSON Sirocco 395455K	58	72	51	59	150	1.0	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[SIMPSON Sirocco 39P350K	56	72	45	58	118	1.0	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[HOOVER 3525DD	55	82	48	48	150	1.0	53	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓
[HOOVER 3530DD	55	82	48	48	150	1.0	nt	Timer	(C) / ✓	✓

SAFETY TIPS

- Clean the filter after every use, as lint build-up overworks the dryer and can pose a fire hazard.
- Never leave your dryer running when you go out – it's a potential fire hazard. If your dryer has a 'delayed start' feature, don't use it if you're out or asleep.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre, NSW, assessed the dryers' suitability for people with certain disabilities:

- Models that can be wall-mounted are most suitable for someone in a wheelchair and those with back pain or upper limb dysfunction. (Of course, any of the models could simply sit on a shelf at the appropriate height.) All the models that are wall-mountable are shown in the table – all can be turned upside-down so the controls are easy to reach.

- If you'd have difficulty reaching into the back of the drum to clean the filter, the SIMPSONs aren't suitable.

- The clearest labelling and simplest controls to understand for someone with cognitive impairment are the FISHER & PAYKEL AD55 and AD39, and the SIMPSON Autosensing Sirocco 39S550K

Models joined by a square bracket are similar, meaning that they get the same scores.

Differences are likely to be in the features, drum material or temperature settings.

- * A full load dried on the program used for energy labelling.

- ** This is the basic warranty; some manufacturers guarantee some parts for longer. Conditions may apply; check with the retailer.

† Based on 150 uses per year.

- †† Prices are recommended retail, as provided by manufacturers in March 2004, unless otherwise noted. You can probably get better prices than these by shopping around.

na Not applicable; this model vents exhaust air from the front and so can't be ducted.

ns Not stated.

nt Not tested.

(A) It also has a timer, but with a single setting of one hour only.

(B) Fittings optional for an extra cost.

(C) Fittings supplied.

(D) Filter not removable: you remove the lint from it in situ.

(E) Resettable; if it's not resettable you'll need a service call before you can use the dryer again.

(F) Extended warranty for \$95, to a total of five years.

(G) Average retail price.

SHARON GRHAM



						SPECIFICATIONS					COSTS	
	Temperature settings	Air exhaust location	Ducting kit	8 Filter location	Overheat protection	Capacity (kg)	Dimensions (W x H x D, cm)	Origin	Warranty (years)**	Manufacturer / distributor	9 Running costs (\$ / 10 years)†	Price (\$!††)
al (B)	M,H	Rear	(C)	Inside front	ns	5.0	60 x 85 x 58	France	2	Whirlpool	754	1039
	M,H	Front	na	Inside front (D)	✓ (E)	5.0	60 x 85 x 53	UK	5	Kleenmaid	852	899
al (B)	M,H	Rear	(C)	Inside front	✓	5.0	60 x 85 x 59	Italy	2	Arisit	780	799
	C,M,H	Rear	(B)	Inside front	ns	4.5	57 x 79 x 56	NZ	2	Fisher & Paykel	800	449 (G)
al (B)	M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	5.0	57 x 78 x 57	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	810	429
	C,M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	5.0	57 x 78 x 56	Australia 2 (F)		Electrolux	810	449
al (B)	H	Front	na	On door	✓	5.0	57 x 78 x 58	Australia 2 (F)		Electrolux	858	479
	C,M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	5.0	57 x 78 x 58	Australia 2 (F)		Electrolux	837	529
al (C)	M,H	Front	na	On door	ns	3.5	57 x 79 x 44	NZ	2	Fisher & Paykel	610	319 (G)
	M,H	Rear	(B)	Inside front	ns	4.5	57 x 79 x 56	NZ	2	Fisher & Paykel	813	399 (G)
al (C)	H	Rear	(B)	Inside rear	✓ (E)	5.0	60 x 72 x 54	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	822	449
	C,M,H	Rear	(B)	Inside rear	✓ (E)	5.0	60 x 72 x 54	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	822	499
al (C)	M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	5.0	57 x 78 x 57	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	837	549
	M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	5.0	57 x 78 x 57	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	865	479
al (B)	M,H	Rear	(B)	Inside rear	✓ (E)	5.0	60 x 72 x 53	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	800	429
	M,H	Rear	(C)	Inside rear	✓ (E)	5.0	60 x 72 x 53	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	800	429
al (C)	C,M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	3.5	57 x 78 x 56	Australia 2 (F)		Electrolux	600	349
	C,M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	3.5	57 x 78 x 56	Australia 2 (F)		Electrolux	600	379
al (B)	C,M,H	Rear	(B)	Inside rear	✓ (E)	4.5	60 x 72 x 54	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	731	379
	C,M,H	Rear	(B)	Inside rear	✓ (E)	4.5	60 x 72 x 54	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	731	399
al (B)	C,M,H	Rear	(B)	Inside rear		3.5	60 x 72 x 46	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	636	349
	M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	3.5	57 x 78 x 46	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	600	349
al (B)	M,H	Front	na	On door	✓	3.5	57 x 78 x 46	Australia 1 (F)		Electrolux	600	379

1 Overall score

This is a combination of the following scores:

- Ease of use: 20%
- Drying performance: 40%
- Drying time: 40%

We didn't test all the dryers in the table. To get an energy rating label and be allowed on the Australian market, dryers not only have their energy efficiency measured but have to achieve a certain level of drying performance. Our drying performance score is therefore calculated from information on the energy rating label. Our previous testing of many dryers' performance and energy use has shown the energy label to be accurate.

Drying time is also available from model specifications without testing.

We assessed and scored the ease of use of several models. Where a model we didn't assess has the same controls and filter as the model we tested, we can give it the same score for ease of use.

Putting the overall score together in this way allows us to bring you scores and information for far more

models than we can test for any one CHOICE report, and we're confident the results as reported reflect reality.

2 Ease of use score

This reflects the ease of using the controls, and accessing and cleaning the filter.

3 Drying performance score

An assessment of how energy-efficient the dryers are at reaching a predetermined level of dryness, also taking into consideration the capacity of the machine. (6% residual moisture is regarded as the desirable level for a dryer to achieve, in order not to overdry clothes.)

4 Drying time score/cycle time

This score is based on the time taken to dry 1 kg of clothes to a predetermined level of dryness.

The cycle time is the total time to dry a full load.

5 Energy rating stars

The star rating on the energy label is a measure of how energy-efficient the

dryer is, and takes into account the capacity of the machine. The more stars the better, with a maximum of six. See page 44 for more on dryer energy efficiency (or lack of) in general.

6 Noise

The quietest of the dryers tested would be noticeably quieter than the noisiest. For comparison, the quietest (53 dB) is similar to the noise level in a small office, while 60 dB is similar to someone's voice in conversation. If you can't get far away from your laundry, this higher level could be enough to be distracting if you were trying to listen to music at the same time, for example.

The numbers given are for comparison and relate only to the noise levels as measured in our lab — the acoustics of your laundry (among other things) will determine how the dryers sound in your home. That's why we can't give noise levels for the dryers we didn't physically test.

7 Features

See *What to look for*, page 45, for more on these features.

8 Filter location

Locating the filter at the front of the machine (rather than inside the drum at the rear) makes it easier to clean after every load — especially if the dryer's mounted on a wall.

9 Running costs

This is based on drying a full load about three times a week (150 loads a year) for 10 years. It's calculated based on an energy cost of 12.5 cents per kWh.

NEW MODELS

SIMPSON models with new graphics

and controls were released in February 2004 — too late for us to include in this report. The new models are called *Eisest* instead of *Sirocco* and their model numbers end in *L* rather than *K*. The manufacturer tells us 'they're easier to use.'

recalls&bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Federal Treasury website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Consumer Safety Unit on (02) 6263 2747.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD: Southern Pacific Foods has recalled **Thai Gourmet Massaman Curry Paste** in a 162 g glass jar, use-by date Feb 2005, sold in Tasmania and Victoria.

The problem: It contains peanuts, which is not declared on the label.
What to do: If you have an allergy or intolerance to peanuts, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call (03) 9357 0988 for further information.

FOOD: Menora Foods has recalled **Wattle Valley Chunky Dip Chilli Red with Cashew and Parmesan** in a 150 g plastic tub, all use-by dates.

The problem: Tests have indicated the presence of a preservative, sulphur dioxide, that isn't declared on the label. Sulphur dioxide may cause allergic reactions in some people.
What to do: If you're allergic to sulphur dioxide, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call (03) 9547 3111 for more information.

FOOD: Azzura Gelati has recalled **Azzura Kisses**, 12-pack, sold in WA only.

The problem: 'May contain traces of nuts' has been omitted from the labelling.
What to do: If you have an allergy or intolerance to nuts, don't eat it. Call (08) 9314 1656 for further information.

FOOD: Primo Smallgoods has recalled **Primo Cocktail Frankfurts** in a 500 g vacuum pack, best-before date 03.03.04, sold in the ACT, NSW, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and WA.

The problem: Testing has indicated the presence of the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. *Listeria* may cause illness in pregnant women, the very young, the elderly and people with low immune systems.

What to do: If you froze this product, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call (02) 9742 0000 for more information.

FOOD: San Remo Macaroni Company and Woolworths have recalled **Home Brand Chicken Noodle Soup Mix**, 50 g single paper-foil sachet, with

best-before dates of 13 Oct 2005 to 9 Feb 2006 inclusive.

The problem: The product contains milk protein, an allergen, which is not declared on the ingredients label.
What to do: If you have an allergy or intolerance to milk protein, don't eat it. Return it to your nearest Woolworths/Safeway/Food For Less supermarket for a refund. For more information call 1800 638 434.

FOOD BLENDER: Breville has recalled **Breville glass blender**, model CBL25, batch numbers 324, 329, 340, 343. The model number is on the rating plate on the bottom of the motor base, and the batch number is a three-digit number in the bottom right-hand corner of the rating label. This blender was first sold in late 2003.

The problem: The blade may break when subjected to heavy loads, creating a risk of the metal blade remaining in the food or beverage if left undetected.

What to do: Stop using it. Call 1300 727 424 weekdays between 8.30 am and 5 pm EST to receive a free replacement blade assembly.

BARBECUE GAS REGULATOR: Amalgamated Hardware Merchants has recalled **DHP Campmaster CM4722 regulator assembly**, model 700A POL, silver/grey-coloured, fitted with a 600 mm hose with 3/8 SAE swivel outlet, production code 0306 (stamped on the underside of the regulator body) or on the hose assembly). It was sold nationally through Big W stores during the period August 1, 2003, to January 15, 2004.

The problem: Due to incorrect fittings there's a risk of gas leakage.
What to do: Stop using it immediately and return it to the nearest Big W store for a replacement or refund. For more information call 0412 101 999 between 9 am and 5 pm EST.

TOY: Early Learning Centre has recalled a **wooden bead frame**, product code 102873, first sold in September 2003 at Early Learning Centre stores.

The problem: The wooden dowel across the base may come unstuck and release beads, creating a potential

choking hazard. A subsequent model has a secondary peg added to the base to ensure that the wooden dowel can't come unstuck.

What to do: If you have one without the secondary peg on the base, return it to your nearest store for a replacement or refund. For more information call 1300 850 123.

TOY: Coast to Coast Imports has recalled a **plastic fire truck**, described as **Red Fire Truck with Ladder and 2 Hoses**, 16.5 x 9.5 cm, item no. TG1059, barcode 9330049 030210, distributed through discount variety stores throughout WA between August and December 2003.

The problem: These trucks don't meet Australian standards.
What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a refund or call (08) 9244 2244 for more information.

BABY JACKET: Target has recalled the **Newborn Boys' Cord Jacket with Faux Fur Lining and Trim**, sizes 000-2, sold through Target, Target Country and Baby Target stores from December 2003.

The problem: The button studs may detach from the jacket, becoming a potential choking hazard.
What to do: Don't put it on your child. Return it to your nearest Target, Target Country or Baby Target store for a refund, or call 1800 814 788 with any queries.

DRINK BOTTLE: Austwide Wholesalers has recalled the **Austwide drink bottle with freezer rod**, model SP3041B, barcode 9316341 210260, sold through discount and variety stores across Australia. The plastic drink bottle includes an inner plastic rod which, when filled with water and frozen, cools the bottle's contents.

The problem: If the entire rod is filled with water and frozen, the expansion of the ice could crack the rod and result in small bits of plastic breaking off into the bottle, becoming a choking hazard.

What to do: Remove and discard the rod to make the bottle safe to use. Otherwise return it to the place

of purchase for a refund. For more information call (08) 9455 3200.

DRINK BOTTLE: Look Sharp Concepts has recalled the **Ice Stick drink bottle**, item no. 16136, sold through discount and variety stores across Australia, except Tasmania, since December 2003. Supplied in various colours, the plastic drink bottle with screw-on lid is fitted with an inner plastic rod which, when filled with water and frozen, cools the bottle's contents.

The problem: If the rod is overfilled with water and frozen, the expansion of the ice could crack the rod and small pieces could break off into the bottle, becoming a choking hazard.

What to do: Remove and discard the rod to make the bottle safe to use. Otherwise return it to the place of purchase for a refund or exchange. For more information call (02) 8796 6900.

BACKPACKING STOVE: Spelehan has recalled **MSR Pocket Rocket stove**, an outdoor recreational backpacking stove sold between January 19 and February 9, 2004. The defective stoves have batch number KCL05 (under the black rubber seal), a gold-coloured base and a hollow pin.

The problem: A defective actuator pin may lead to a gas leak during installation/removal of the stove to/from a gas canister, creating a fire hazard in the presence of an ignition source.

What to do: Don't use it. Call 1800 634 853 to arrange for a replacement stove or for further information.

VACUUM CLEANER: Electrolux has recalled **Electrolux ZB266X rechargeable vacuum cleaners** with a serial number beginning with 0319xxxx, sold from June 2003 onwards. The serial number is on the underside of the product on a silver-coloured plate.

The problem: It may experience a short, which could cause wires to melt and smoke.

What to do: Return it to the place of purchase for a replacement, or call 1300 366 366 for more information.

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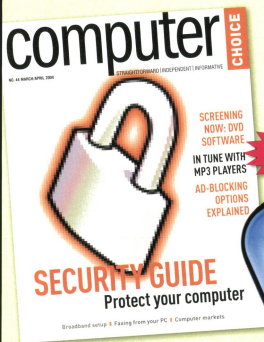
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HOW TO USE THIS INDEX

Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.

* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts and other small pieces.

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What if your favourite cereal is Weet-bix?

Reader Chris Niblett takes issue with a number of aspects of this
promotion for a cereal dispenser.

■ "Say goodbye to bulky cereal boxes"? Just look at the size
— and rather awkward shape — of the dispenser. It's not exactly
going to solve the alleged pantry problem. And if, like many
families, you've got several boxes of cereal on the go, you'll have
to count on having a lot of free bench space.

■ "Saves waste and spills"? The picture on the right, while more
likely art rather than accident, hardly sends the right message.

■ And who buys their cereal in litres? It's not a very meaningful
spec when most of us buy it in grams.

CALAIS MERINGUES
• 5 FLAVOURS •

INGREDIENTS: SUGAR, STABILISER (461),
MILK SOLIDS, ENZYME MODIFIED SOY
PROTEIN, VEGETABLE GUM (410, 412, 466),
FOOD ACID (330), MINERAL SALT (500),
COLOUR (102, 122, 123, 124, 133), FLAVOUR

Look, mum, no egg whites!

For a sweet treat that's simplicity itself, it's hard to
go past the meringue — just egg white and sugar.
And then there are these ... er, whatever-they-ares.

INSTANT PORRIDGE PLUS
NOW 12 SINGLE SERVES
natural honey
or real fruit

Uncle Tobys Instant Porridge Plus - is just that, porridge plus
honey or natural fruits, ready in an instant! Each no mess, single
serve, sachet is sealed for freshness to deliver the perfect mix of
oats, honey or real fruit pieces.

INGREDIENTS

Contains oats, milk, egg and sulphate as indicated in bold type.

BANANA

100% Natural rolled Uncle Tobys quality oats, sugar, dried
banana (13%), milk powder, dextrose, preservative (220)*.

HONEY

100% Natural rolled Uncle Tobys quality oats, sugar, milk
powder, maltodextrin, honey (2%).

STRAWBERRY

100% Natural rolled Uncle Tobys quality oats, sugar, milk
powder, apple, strawberry (1%), dextrose, vegetable gum
(pectin), natural flavour (strawberry), food acid (citric),
natural colour (120).

APPLE AND CUSTARD

100% Natural rolled Uncle Tobys quality oats, sugar, dried
apple (5%), milk powder, egg powder, natural flavour (french
vanilla), natural colour (caramel), preservative (220)*.

*May contain traces of peanuts and other nuts.

*Some dried fruits contain sulphur dioxide to maintain
natural colour and shelf life

IT'S JUST NOT JUST

You can't take the 'just'
in this blurb too literally.
The **UNCLE TOBYS Porridge**
Plus products variously
contain sugar, egg
powder, dextrose, pectin,
colours, preservatives
and maltodextrin, as well
as just porridge, honey or
natural fruits.

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The book prize for this month's best entry goes to S Liddell.

The *Hard Word* would like to thank all the readers who've
responded with examples of outrageous ads, promotions and
products. Thanks to S Liddell, C Niblett, W Lund, J Scroggie and
J Hughes for their contribution to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep
them coming.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page,
send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville
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